



THE ECUMENICAL CONSULTATION  
ON PROTOCOLS FOR  
WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, AND SACRAMENTS

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# Introduction

From the very beginning, Christian believers have gathered for worship, prayer, instruction, and “breaking bread” to remember Jesus, the One who called them into one Body, the Church. Less than two months after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the believers “were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). In an early summary of what church life was like, Luke tells us that, “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home, and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46).

For two millennia Christians have continued to gather, assured of the promise of Jesus that, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). We have gathered in small house churches and in soaring cathedrals; we have gathered in one-room chapels and multi-million-dollar facilities; we have met by trees on savannahs and in brush arbors in camp meetings; we have met secretly in underground gatherings and openly in rallies attracting thousands.

Until we couldn’t meet safely.

The coronavirus pandemic has challenged churches to continue being the Church without gathering in person. In many places we have met that challenge by meeting online, live streaming worship, providing instructions for worship at home, and finding other ways to connect.

Now churches face another challenge. As states “re-open,” how will we resume worship gatherings in person while the pandemic is still with us?

A care-filled response to that challenge is much more than unlocking the church doors and inviting all to come, sit, sing, and greet one another as had been our custom. We know the dangers posed and the risks taken if we were to do that. We care enough not to let that happen.

That's why we, an ecumenical group of theologians, scientists, physicians, pastors, bishops, and practitioners from United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Episcopal, Pan-Methodist, and Roman Catholic traditions, among others, have gathered in an extended consultation. We have brought to this consultation our particular areas of expertise and we have sought consensus on recommendations for worship, fellowship, and sacramental practices for our Churches in this pandemic. We have also shared our deliberations publicly through live stream and recorded video, receiving many helpful comments from those who have watched us at work.

We joined this consultation because we care about people and their safety. And we care about finding ways to gather for worship in this new environment, ways that are rich with theological tradition and faithful in public witness.

We also care about the many leaders who are being asked to take on responsibilities for worship they had not previously imagined. Before we began our consultation, we surveyed pastors from across our denominations. Hundreds of them shared their questions and their dreams for worship gatherings to come. Here are the questions we saw surfacing the most:

- What are the best ways we can keep **physical distancing** and disinfection protocols?
- How can we enforce those protocols while also showing real hospitality that bridges all of our theological and social differences?
- How will we find the leaders for all we now need to do?
- How will we meet the increased need for financial and human resources as we incorporate physical distancing and ongoing, careful disinfection?

#### Physical distancing

We use the phrase “physical distancing” instead of “social distancing,” as the latter may have a connotation of racial/ethnic segregation.

We hear your desire to keep people safe and your sense of being overwhelmed. We share your commitment to address divisions in our society that are magnified by the pandemic and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people of color, people without access to health care, the elderly, and people who are at high risk.

We hear you saying that you want worship to be as rich and fulfilling as possible for those who can gather in the face of or despite the limitations needed so that all can worship safely in this pandemic.

Our consultation has developed this resource to help your congregations engage their own care-filled work to resume worship gatherings in the weeks or months ahead.



## Our Theological Foundations

Whatever the Church does in its gatherings and other ministries expresses our understanding of who God is, what it means to be disciples of Jesus, and how the Holy Spirit empowers us to be witnesses to what God intends for the world. In times of crisis, when we must address new and challenging practical concerns, our basic theological convictions still apply: love of God and neighbor; regard for human bodies and fellowship; worship and sacraments; inclusive hospitality that welcomes all and avoids stigmatizing others; and the beauty of God, the world, and human creativity.

### LOVE

Jesus taught that love of God and love of every neighbor are two inseparable aspects of one great commandment for the people of God (Matthew 22:35-40). Our love for God and neighbor is a response to God's love for the world revealed in Jesus (John 3:16). Love motivates everything we do as disciples of Jesus Christ, including how we worship and fellowship with one another. Especially during times of crisis, faithful Christian worship expresses the fullness of the gospel, both what it requires (love of God, self, neighbor, and the world) and what it releases (love, joy, peace, forgiveness, and deliverance in all forms). Love is the ground of all of our work in this project, and of all of the work God calls each congregation and ministry to undertake.

During this pandemic, love of neighbor requires careful planning. Because we love God, we want to offer worship that brings our very best. Because we love our neighbors, we want to do everything we can to make sure we bring no harm to anyone when we gather.

### HUMAN BODIES AND FELLOWSHIP

Christians profess that God the Son is incarnate, God become flesh (John 1:14). As God came to the world in a fully human body, Christians relate to God through our bodies. Christians also understand

ourselves as members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). Therefore, Christians have generally recognized the assembly where we gather as members of one body to be the foundation of our worship.

The body of believers gathered in one place is an important theme in the New Testament. Jesus gathered his disciples in an upper room for a meal together. After the resurrection, on the day of Pentecost, three thousand were baptized and joined with the followers of Jesus Christ. They then “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). These five signs—baptism, teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and the prayers—have been common Christian practices since the very beginning. This gathered body called itself a “fellowship.”

During a pandemic, gathering requires a delicate balance as we Christians weigh our need for being together as people of all ages, infant through older adult, alongside our commitments not to harm our neighbors through accidental spread of disease. We affirm that Christians may find different, faithful solutions to this dilemma so long as we do not endanger ourselves or others. We offer guidance for how we can gather in careful ways that can minimize the risks so that our bodies and our fellowship might flourish.

## SACRAMENTAL LIFE

All of our Christian communities draw life from the practice of the sacraments in worship. The Church has long taught that the sacraments come from Jesus’ commandments and promises to his disciples:

**Matthew 28:19–20**

**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.**

**Matthew 26:26–28**

**While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”**

Baptism initiates us into Christ and his living body, the Church. Holy Communion unites us in praise and thanksgiving to God for all God has done to save us, and it feeds us with the living presence of Jesus, crucified and risen. Christians long to gather again to celebrate the sacraments out of obedience and love for Jesus and each other even as we acknowledge the present need for careful planning.

## INCLUSION

Jesus announced good news to people often excluded from the societies of his day. He welcomed young children, empowered women, healed the sick, and reached out to people with all kinds of physical, mental, and spiritual illnesses. His love excluded no one.

Yet now, for the sake of the common good, we will have to consider the number and the health status of people who can gather and worship safely in our church buildings. We lament the pain and difficulty of these limitations, and we look forward to the day when we no longer have to maintain such physical distance from one another. We will do everything we can to include by other means those who may not freely gather in our places of worship.

### ...WHILE AVOIDING STIGMATIZING OTHERS

Faithful Christian practices help to heal and free people from the stigma that identifies infectious diseases as God's punishment for individual sin. We read in the Gospel:

**John 9:1-3**

**As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.**

Social stigmas lead to fear, exclusion, blame, and discrimination against individuals and communities, at times with deadly results. In order to be inclusive, we guard against stigmatization and fear in our worship and fellowship practices so that God's works of healing and insight may be revealed through the lives of all kinds of individuals and communities.

### BEAUTY

Christians profess the beauty of God that nourishes the human need for beauty. In the words of the King James Bible, Psalm 96:9 declares: "O Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness." When we find beauty in music, the visual arts, or dance, we often experience this as a feeling of awe that draws us more deeply to the worship of God. All our creative arts and music are a reflection of the beautiful holiness of God.

Art and music take many forms requiring differing degrees of human skill and technical complexity. In a time of physical distancing, we must also learn to find beauty in silence and simplicity. Yet the need for attention to the beauty of worship remains as we seek fresh ways to express the beauty we know in God, in each other, and in the whole creation.



# Benchmarks for Resuming Worship Gatherings of Various Sizes

In late April 2020, the White House with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Coronavirus Task Force issued a [set of benchmarks](#) to indicate when it would be safe to re-open various kinds of activities, and how many people could safely gather under specific distancing guidelines.

The benchmarks involve both state and local public health conditions and the readiness of states and local communities to provide testing, appropriate health care, and follow-up with people who may have been exposed to someone diagnosed with COVID-19.

## BENCHMARKS FOR RESUMING PUBLIC GATHERINGS

Beginning Criteria	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
A clear downward trajectory in the number of reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID-19 for 2 CONSECUTIVE WEEKS	A clear downward trajectory in the number of reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID-19 for 2 MORE CONSECUTIVE WEEKS	A clear downward trajectory in the number of reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID-19 for 2 MORE CONSECUTIVE WEEKS	An ongoing downward trajectory in the number of reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID-19.

Each benchmark must be satisfied before moving to the next level. Increases in reported cases mean a return to the previous level.

These general guidelines apply at every level:

- Stay at home if you are sick, and self-quarantine if you think you may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.
- Wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer, especially after touching frequently used items or surfaces.
- Disinfect frequently used items and surfaces.
- Use cloth face coverings while in public. Children under 2, those with breathing problems, and those who are unable to remove a mask on their own should not wear face coverings.

As long as we follow these individual hygiene requirements, the size of social gatherings with an acceptable level of risk gradually increases:

### RECOMMENDED MAXIMUM SIZE FOR GATHERINGS

Level 1 Social gatherings of up to 10	Level 2 Social gatherings of up to 50	Level 3 Social gatherings of over 50 with 6-ft. distance and face coverings
Except for: People over 65 Individuals with serious underlying health conditions: high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and those whose immune system is compromised.	Except for: People over 65 Individuals with serious underlying health conditions: high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and those whose immune system is compromised.	Vulnerable individuals can resume public interactions, but should practice physical distancing, and minimize exposure to social settings where distancing may not be practical.
Other factors to consider: length of interactions (the shorter the better); size of room; indoor versus outdoor activities (outdoor is generally less risky); air circulation (open air is generally less risky).		

We have been grateful to see dioceses, synods, annual conferences, and other church organizations issuing [guidelines](#) that take seriously the CDC's approach to benchmarks. As we discover them, we will continue to collect and post these at this site: [https://drive.google.com/drive/u/2/folders/1zil5q5ssl6faxgR2WBbPDHg\\_4kvp6YOS](https://drive.google.com/drive/u/2/folders/1zil5q5ssl6faxgR2WBbPDHg_4kvp6YOS)

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## Faithful Basic Practices

Beginning in late winter 2020, our places of gathering for worship temporarily closed their doors for the sake of the common good. But the Church was not closed. The Church is the body of Christ that includes saints throughout all time and space. We are “like living stones” being formed “into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5) even when we cannot gather in person.

As we begin to resume worship gatherings, our commitments to love, embodiment, sacraments, inclusive hospitality, and beauty are unwavering. The context in which we now express these commitments, however, has changed dramatically. In this new environment, wisdom also calls us to pay attention to the best that medical science (through **CDC guidance**) can teach us.

And at this moment, medical science calls us to exercise certain limits. We can look at limits in a negative way. Or we can see them as a way to protect us all and as an opportunity for creativity. Respecting the limits necessary for a wholesome life is a central theme of the Old Testament, particularly Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

### CDC guidance

Our recommendations are based on CDC guidance issued on May 22, 2020. This is available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/faith-based.html> or at [https://docs.google.com/document/d/17fhkrkUA050\\_EaQ-GviHXKTnS6T4p0Y1W7A3w1M9ukM](https://docs.google.com/document/d/17fhkrkUA050_EaQ-GviHXKTnS6T4p0Y1W7A3w1M9ukM).

During the pandemic, public health guidelines ask everyone to:

- Stay home when we are ill or especially vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Maintain physical distancing of 6 feet or more at all times as we enter, worship, and depart.
- Limit the size of gatherings according to guidance provided by denominational, state, or local authorities.
- Use face coverings at all times while in public, except those under 2 years old, those with breathing difficulties, or those who are not able to remove a face covering on their own.
- Reduce exposure time in worship and fellowship gatherings.
- Limit physical touching to what Christian ritual requires, such as the laying on of hands at baptism.
- Avoid practices known to spread the virus more widely, such as congregational or choral singing, unison speaking, speaking loudly, shouting, and playing wind and brass instruments.

As we continue to seek wisdom for how to love our neighbors and promote the well-being of all, it is important to use all of the resources available to us:

- Guidance we find in scripture
- Guidance we learn through our Christian tradition
- Guidance provided by episcopal offices, and
- Guidance issued by the CDC along with federal, state, and local public health authorities.



## Getting Ready to Resume Worship Gatherings

Many congregations are now beginning to prepare to resume worship gatherings. Safety for all who gather with us requires care-filled work, including:

### CREATING A COORDINATION TEAM

We recommend starting the preparation by creating a “COVID-19 Task Force.” This coordination team must have the authority to guide the initial preparations, develop policies (which may be adopted by a church council, vestry, or similar body), and oversee the implementation of the adopted policies as long as COVID-19 remains a threat.

At its first meetings, this team will want to take some time to familiarize itself with guidance documents such as this or others your official church body provides. Our document focuses particularly on *why* what you are doing matters. Others may provide more detail on how to accomplish specific tasks.

### PREPARING THE BUILDING

Responsible planning will aim to ensure that all who come to worship gatherings are as safe as possible, with as few exposures to infection as possible.

*Checklist for basic safety in your building and on your grounds:*

- ❑ Thoroughly disinfect all high-touch surfaces (pews, tables, chairs, pulpit, worship implements, door handles, light switches, microphones, keyboards, etc.) using EPA approved disinfectants prior to and after any worship service or meetings occurring in indoor church facilities. The CDC offers these guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting: [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/Reopening\\_America\\_Guidance.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/Reopening_America_Guidance.pdf).
- ❑ Obtain and stock sufficient supplies of needed disinfectants for any activities that will be permitted indoors on church premises. Maintain stock constantly until the threat of COVID-19 is eliminated.
- ❑ As needed, adjust the spaces where worship leaders and musicians do their work so that they are sufficiently physically distanced from the worshiping congregation and from one another.
- ❑ Remove items used by a number of people or that are not easily disinfected, such as offering plates and hymnals.
- ❑ Identify where seats are available. Plan to start seating at least 16 feet away from where worship leaders are likely to be since they may sometimes need to use louder voices. All available seating for the congregation should provide for at least 6 feet in all directions between co-sheltering households. In many cases, this will mean that at most 25% of available seating capacity can be used until state or local health officials advise it is safe for physical distancing to be somewhat relaxed.
- ❑ Provide seating for families that allows children more space for movement.
- ❑ Post signs to inform or direct worshipers and guests:
  - To maintain physical distancing
  - To wear cloth face coverings
  - About entrances and exits
  - About COVID-19 symptoms
  - How to wash and disinfect hands
  - To maintain physical distancing in restrooms

The CDC provides signage and templates to create your own: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/print-resources.html?Sort=Date%3A%3Adesc>

- ❑ Place mark(er)s on the ground outdoors in front of all entry and exit doors at 6-foot intervals to ensure distancing is maintained between individuals and co-sheltering household groups on entry and exit. Do the same for indoor traffic areas. This includes pathways to restrooms if restrooms can be made available safely.
- ❑ Consider using a separate entrance and exit to avoid people entering and exiting the same doorway at the same time.
- ❑ Provide wipes and sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol content, along with trash cans at all points of entry, at all restrooms (if restrooms will be made available), at all exits, and within reach of seating areas in case anyone should cough or sneeze or otherwise need additional disinfecting during the service. For information on handwashing and the proper use of hand sanitizer, see <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html>.

## PREPARING THE ASSISTANTS

Greeters and ushers help people feel welcome and provide important information about the activities of the day. These worship assistants take on an even more important role as churches resume worship gatherings in a pandemic.

Nearly everything about the experience of worship gatherings is likely to be somewhat different, and for some, uncomfortable. Along with everyone else, ushers and greeters wear cloth face coverings. Greeters will need to be especially attentive to how they communicate warmth and welcome, knowing that many people may be a little nervous as they enter. Ushers may need to be trained to give effective and hospitable guidance regarding signage, seating, disinfection, and face coverings. Both greeters and ushers should avoid using elevated voices to lessen the risk of virus transmission (even through cloth face coverings).

Requiring cloth face coverings also opens up opportunities for creativity and service in the congregation. Congregations may ask volunteers or ministry teams involved in the fabric arts to make cloth face coverings to be given to individuals who do not have them. Ushers and greeters could have extras in individual bags to provide to members and visitors. Congregations should consider identifying members of their COVID-19 task force (or council, vestry, etc.) to stand with the ushers, properly physically distanced, in case there is a need for someone to explain the policies of the church to people who are hesitant to wear a cloth face covering.

## DECIDING HOW AND WHEN TO RESUME MAY DIFFER AMONG CONGREGATIONS

Congregations differ in their resources, size, location, and other important factors. Likewise, Christians differ with respect to many personal needs and commitments. It is important to respect the freedom of individuals, congregations, and judicatories in making decisions about reopening church buildings for public gatherings. But it is also important for individuals and congregational leaders to observe hygiene and distancing recommendations. Some may decide to wait to resume worship and fellowship in their facilities until it is safe to do so without the need for physical distancing or other restrictions. Others may choose to gather sooner and adapt worship and fellowship practices to reduce the potential for spread of disease. At all times, Christians will seek to act responsibly in the exercise of their religion as they fulfill their obligation to love their neighbors as themselves.

Church leaders will allow both individuals and congregations the freedom to decide the timing and manner of reopening buildings for worship and fellowship as long as they follow denominational guidance and act responsibly according to recommended public health practices.

Christians will refrain from judging the witness of others as long as others are not endangering the common good.

## PREPARING THE CONGREGATION

An appropriate team in the congregation will want to develop a communication plan for announcing the resumption of worship gatherings and what to expect in them. This may involve a staged roll-out appropriate to [CDC benchmarks](#). At level 1 (gatherings of 10 or fewer) and level 2 (gatherings of 50 or fewer), congregations may have to limit how many people can attend to allow for proper physical distancing. This will require much organization, careful explanation, and pastoral sensitivity to the needs of the local community.

One option for preparing the congregation may be a soft startup. In a soft startup, congregations may choose to limit attendance by inviting a representative number of volunteers who are not in any of the high-risk categories. Congregations should also prepare to welcome any persons who happen to seek entrance to gatherings. This may help the congregation test its capacity to practice appropriate safety measures.

In all messaging, be sure to emphasize how modified entry, worship, and exit practices help the congregation fulfill its mission and express its values. Provide clear information about whether or how you will provide for restrooms, changing rooms, families with small children, and people with special needs. Highlight the alternatives that the church is providing for people for whom indoor worship services are not suitable at this time while sharing how the congregation will include as many people as its facilities and abilities allow.

We suggest beginning communication at least one month prior to resuming worship gatherings. Communication should also note that ongoing worship and other gatherings will depend on ongoing improvements or elimination of cases of COVID-19 in the local area as well as on applicable state and local guidance or laws.



# Planning Worship

## PLANNING *FOR* BEAUTY

Beauty is fundamental for worship. It is especially important for us to consider beauty when so many things we have relied on in the past to foster our awareness of beauty may not be available to us for some time. Rather than focusing on what *cannot* be done at this time, worship planners may draw upon the diverse gifts of the congregation, including the gifts of children, to discover what *can* be done in worship to bless God and edify the church. This could be video, poetry, sculpture, painting, dance, fabric arts, audio-visual and graphic design—whatever can be offered that enlivens awareness of the beauty of God and God’s creation.

## PLANNING *WITH* LIMITS

The limits on typical worship practices during this pandemic are becoming more and more apparent. We must be careful not to spread the coronavirus through breath, we must wear face coverings, and we must keep at least 6 feet away from people not in our own households. Even brief moments of closer contact that may be required by some necessary activities should be preceded and followed by **disinfecting hands**, which makes such moments at least a bit more awkward.

Because we know that longer exposure indoors increases the risk of transmitting the virus, we also face the limitations of a briefer worship service.

### Disinfecting hands

Throughout this guide we call for the disinfecting of hands according to CDC directions: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/hygiene/hand/handwashing.html>.

The CDC uses the term “disinfect” when talking about using disinfecting cleaners in a non-food service setting. It uses the term “sanitize” for food service settings. It speaks of using hand sanitizer to disinfect hands.

We recommend that worship leaders disinfect their hands in full sight of the congregation to help the congregation feel at ease about things the leaders will touch. If it is done with clear intention and openly (but not awkwardly), the act will communicate to the congregation, “This matters!”

None of these limits substantially inhibits Christians from offering vital and vibrant worship. They simply impinge on ways we have grown most accustomed to worship over time. After all, we do not have to sing, speak loudly, offer unison responses, or even be close to each other to worship “in spirit and in truth.” We can look at the limits we have as barriers, blocking access to some of our familiar pathways. But we can also look at them as challenges which, with the Spirit’s empowerment, may become a spring of creativity.

There will no doubt be complaints about the limits we must observe. People will want to do what they have always done and what feels familiar. Some of what was familiar will remain. There may still be a fourfold pattern of Entrance, Word and Response, Thanksgiving [and Communion], and Sending. Given a shortened service time, the value of each of these movements of our worship may become more pronounced, and the contribution of each to the whole much clearer. Or if your typical pattern of Sunday worship is built around preaching and prayer, you may spend more time on prayer itself and a bit less on preaching.

All of us will feel the pinch of the limits and the pang of longing for the more familiar. Yet now we are given a rare opportunity to revisit our long Christian tradition—the centuries of ways we have worshipped and prayed—and receive from the vast array of gifts of the Spirit among us here and now.

The consultation will release additional planning resources in the coming weeks with notice and links on our Facebook page: [Ecumenical Protocols for Worship, Fellowship, and Sacramental Practices](#)



## Resuming Worship, Sacraments, and Pastoral Rites

For every worship gathering, advance planning and careful rehearsal of new or unfamiliar elements is key to doing a good job with leadership. Confident ritual leadership enables the congregation to participate confidently as well.

With the added requirements of spacing and limited seating, the entrance into worship and sending out into service will need adaptation. The time of entrance could be accompanied by an extended prelude, or an invitation into contemplative silence, or a period for a devotional reflection. Sending, too, could be reframed as a slow-moving parade or procession into the world, with physical distancing reimagined as something like the space between participants in a marching band.

None of our official worship books offers guidance for how to lead worship while wearing a cloth face covering or how to use hand sanitizer dispensers in a worship service. When such new practices are required, however, they become part of worship. Therefore, how we handle them matters. To become more comfortable with the practice, we encourage worship leaders to rehearse leading the service while wearing a cloth face covering. When leaders need to use hand sanitizer, we suggest they develop a calm, gracious, and consistent way of doing so, visible to all in the congregation. This allows leaders to model the proper way to use hand sanitizer, and it encourages the congregation to feel at ease with the practice.

The location of a worship service also matters for worship planning. The research on COVID-19 transmission has underscored this. Spaces that are smaller and with minimal air circulation and exchange are far more likely to foster transmission than larger spaces with more rapid air replacement.

Outdoor spaces may be the safest of all.

So, as you consider plans to resume gatherings, keep all of your available spaces, both indoors and outdoors, in mind. It may be more feasible to gather safely and sooner for outdoor celebrations than indoor gatherings. An airy fellowship hall or gym with lots of space and frequent air replacement may be a better place to begin indoors than the usual worship space. Use all available spaces to maximize the safety of those who gather for worship.

## SINGING AND MUSIC

Music is a gift from God given to all creation. It is a means of connecting with God and with one another, and of unifying our thoughts and understanding, our heartbeats and breath.

Whether by singing, playing, moving, or listening, music is an integral part of the majority of Christians' worship life. Praising the Lord is a scriptural mandate (see Psalm 150) and singing is a primary way most Christians have "praised the Lord" together.

However, we are now coming to grips with this disconcerting fact: The coronavirus is spread through moist breath. Several recent studies have found that forceful, sustained breathing, such as during singing and playing brass and wind instruments, appears to pose a greater danger of spreading the coronavirus than ordinary speaking at low volume.

These findings lead us to recommend the following during the pandemic:

- Refrain from congregational and choral singing.
- Encourage the congregation to participate in music with body percussion such as clapping, tapping their thighs, and stomping.
- Refrain from using any musical instruments that require breath (wind instruments, brass instruments, anything into which one blows to produce sound).
- Use all other instruments (keyboard, percussion, string).
- Avoid sharing instruments, and take care to disinfect instruments before and after use.
- Limit the size of ensembles (4 or fewer) and maintain a 6-foot distance between performers with face coverings on.
- Employ silence effectively. Consider using American Sign Language to sing a hymn or song silently.
- Keep up to date with ongoing research on the use of music during the pandemic. Here is a curated (and constantly updated) list of resources and updates about congregational singing and COVID-19: <https://thehymnsociety.org/covid-19/>.

## PREACHING AND PRAYERS

Preaching and praying have been essential practices of public worship from the earliest days of the Church. It is hard to imagine Sunday service without preaching and praying. However, since these actions involve the voice, they have the risk of producing aerosols (droplets of water suspended in air)

that can spread the coronavirus. This risk is also related to the size of the room, the distance between people, the flow of air, and the length of time in a confined space. With this in mind, we recommend:

- Keeping services (including sermons) brief. For the risks of extended exposure in public gatherings, see <https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them>.
- Encouraging all speakers to keep their voice at a low volume, and if possible, using a wireless microphone.
- Adopting some standard gestures or using American Sign Language for brief liturgical responses.
- Teaching children these gestures to encourage them to participate.
- Refraining from speaking unison prayers or responses.
- Considering projecting a full script of the service, including the sermon, for those who are hearing impaired if your congregation has projection media capability.
- The preacher keeping a face covering on while preaching.

## HOLY COMMUNION

Many of us are longing to share services of Word and Table (Word and Sacrament) in the fellowship of our congregations. Holy Communion can be resumed in ways that honor both distance and intimacy. It may be possible to give and receive the bread, even if not always the cup, and if not huddled at a rail, then in other ways. Widely-held Christian tradition affirms that when we cannot receive both bread and cup, or when physical impairment means we cannot receive either, the grace of the sacrament is still fully available. Whenever the sacrament is offered to us and the intention to receive is present, so is God's grace.

Because the celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion necessarily involves brief breaches of physical distancing, we offer these possibilities for how it may be celebrated responsibly. This may be possible outdoors as soon as Level 1, or indoors as soon as [Level 2](#).

As already noted, the CDC recommends maintaining a physical distance of at least 6 feet at all times. The act of receiving Communion *will* require a brief moment of physical closeness; apart from that, congregations need to keep the 6-foot rule. If the congregation approaches the table by forming a line, you will need to place mark(er)s on the floor at 6-foot intervals as a guide. Ask those in line to wait at each marker for the person (or family) in front of them to move to the next mark(er). This applies both to coming to receive and returning to a seat. If this is not feasible in your location, Communion servers may consider bringing the elements to people in their seats, keeping the 6-foot distance between servers. Ushers may facilitate the movement, while also maintaining proper distance.

**OPTION A:** If both bread and wine are used.

1. One person who wears a cloth face covering and who has thoroughly washed or disinfected their hands before touching the elements and their containers prepares the elements and places them on the altar/table before the service begins.
2. The presider and assisting ministers wash their hands thoroughly or use hand sanitizer immediately before the Great Thanksgiving.
3. The presider and assistants wear cloth face coverings during the rite.
4. Immediately prior to The Great Thanksgiving, a single assistant may uncover elements placed on the table.
5. The presider leads the Great Thanksgiving from at least 6 feet away from (and preferably behind) the Lord's Table. The presider speaks at a low volume to reduce aerosols. If possible, the presider should use a wireless microphone to keep hands free. At the conclusion of the Great Thanksgiving, the presider approaches the table to break the bread in silence.
6. The congregation will refrain from saying aloud the liturgical responses or unison prayers, as this creates aerosols in the same way as choral [singing](#) does. Although it may feel awkward at first, as long as everyone has a face covering, the congregation may silently "mouth" the words to the liturgical responses and prayers, while a single leader speaks the words on their behalf. It may be helpful for congregations to adopt hand gestures for the opening dialogue of the Great Thanksgiving. For example, as the presider gestures to the congregation during the words, "The Lord be with you," the congregation may return the gesture as a way of signaling, "And also with you."
7. The presider returns to the previous position 6 feet from the Lord's Table to speak words about the bread and cup as a server would when giving them to individuals.
8. The presider may be served the bread and cup at that time or later, as Church or local tradition may indicate. If the presider receives first, the presider will use hand sanitizer again before serving others.
9. Ushers may direct seating groups or individuals to a station for receiving. Any lines will maintain 6-foot spacing between households. Alternatively, the presider and assistants may serve the elements to communicants at their seats. No words are exchanged as communicants are within 6 feet of servers.
10. To serve the bread, the server may place the bread or wafer into the opened palms of the one receiving while avoiding touching hands. (Disinfect hands again if accidental touching occurs.)
11. To serve the cup, a pouring chalice or flagon may be used and individual cups given to the receiver by a server.
12. Another assistant may go to the table while others are being served to [prepare elements](#) for distribution to those unwillingly absent.

**OPTION B:** If only bread is distributed to the congregation.

Follow guidelines above, except distribute only bread. At the conclusion of the distribution, the presider may receive the bread and the wine, leaving plenty for distribution to those unwillingly absent.

## THE EXCHANGE OF PEACE

The Exchange of Peace is an important ministry of the church. Early Christians grounded its use as a means of reconciliation and blessing in the teaching and example of Jesus:

**Matthew 5:23–24**

**“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”**

**John 20:19**

**[O]n that day, the first day of the week . . . Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”**

Throughout history, the sign of peace has taken on many forms—a kiss, a handshake, a hug. This sign of “reconciliation and love” includes both word and gesture as worshippers receive and extend to one another the gift of Christ’s peace.

In this time of physical distancing, the words may be the same, but the gesture must avoid physical contact. We offer these suggestions for words and gestures:

- The presider may greet the assembly from an appropriate distance, speaking the typical words announcing the peace to the assembly. This may be accompanied by a gesture extending both arms to the assembly. Without speaking, the assembly may respond with a similar gesture to the presider.
- When the congregation is invited to exchange the peace among themselves, they may do so without spoken words using one of the following gestures:
  - A gentle nod, or even a deep, reverent bow toward one another
  - Signing the phrase “The Peace of Christ be with you,” with American Sign Language
  - A simple wave to one another
  - Crossing arms over the chest, as a symbol of an embrace
- Teach children these gestures to encourage them to participate.

## LAYING ON OF HANDS

Churches use laying on of hands in services of baptism, confirmation, healing, ordination, and consecration. This gesture in Christian worship is a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit and is essential to these rites, even though it requires a brief time of physical closeness and touch.

At baptism, the minister or priest places hands on the candidate and prays for the work of the Holy Spirit. Prayers for healing typically include touching or laying on of hands by the one leading the prayer. A bishop lays hands on a candidate for ordination or consecration. In many communities, the number of persons who touch others in each of these services has increased by local custom.

The need for physical distancing prompts us to make the following recommendations:

- All those leading and participating in such services wear cloth **face coverings**.
- The person who is to lay on hands disinfects their hands in full view of the congregation immediately prior to the gesture and again after completing the laying on of hands.
- Only one person offers the laying on of hands for each candidate unless the ritual *requires* otherwise.
- Other persons may participate in the service from an appropriate distance. They may be asked to stand in place and raise a hand, palm down, pointed in the direction of the candidate or recipient during the prayers.

#### Face coverings

During the pandemic, we need to wear cloth face coverings when we are in public places. But wearing cloth face coverings in worship clashes with our desire to be open before God and one another. “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18)

There are other problems:

- Face coverings muffle our voices.
- They hide our faces, which communicate as much as our voices.
- They can make us feel awkward or even afraid.
- They may be difficult for children to understand and use.
- And face coverings are a particular problem for the deaf community because they block facial clues.

That said, Christians will wear face coverings in worship during the pandemic so they can love their neighbors as themselves. But Christians cannot take cloth face coverings for granted or treat them as a new normal. We can take comfort in knowing that nothing can hide or separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38–39).

## BAPTISM

Baptism, like Holy Communion, requires physical closeness. The presider applies water to the one being baptized in the name of the Triune God, named in the rites of our churches as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then the presider lays hands on the head of the newly baptized person, often with a prayer for the outpouring of the Spirit, and an anointing.

While there is historical precedent for administering the water in a number of ways that may not require direct touch, the laying on of hands does require touch. Very brief proximity (2 to 3 minutes at most) can be allowed for this important rite so long as all participants who are able to wear cloth face coverings do so. Children under 2, those with breathing issues, or those unable to remove a face covering without assistance should not wear cloth face coverings.

Baptism is an essential rite of the church. To perform baptisms while limiting physical closeness and touch to what is necessary in the rite, we suggest the following:

1. Provide for physical distancing between family members and sponsors not of the same household.
2. Discontinue the baptism of *groups* of candidates not of the same household in the same service until physical distancing restrictions are no longer necessary.
3. Be sure the presider and assistants wash or disinfect their hands before the rite and immediately before and after each baptism.
4. When infants are baptized, allow the parent or caregiver to hold an infant during the entire rite. Parents or caregivers maintain a physical distance of 6 feet from the presider except during the administration of the water and the laying on of hands. Persons living in the same household do not need to maintain physical distancing from one another, only from the presider.
5. Encourage the presider to speak at a **low volume** and avoid breathing directly on the candidate or sponsors through the face covering.
6. Refrain from conducting baptisms at larger public worship gatherings during the pandemic. However, it is important that some members of a congregation (2 or 3) are present as witnesses. When smaller gatherings for public worship are allowable in light of local public health guidance, a congregation may consider holding a rite of baptism (or confirmation) before or after larger gatherings with a smaller group of the congregation in attendance.
7. If a small font is used, pour water into the font from a pitcher at the time of the rite. Perform indicated gestures of blessing over the water without touching the water. Take water from the bowl with a ladle and pour it over the head of the candidate. Include a separate basin to catch the water if the service is not outdoors or if water from the font will be used for another baptism.

#### Low volume

The purpose of speaking at a low volume is both to limit the spread of the coronavirus through our breath and to help those gathered for worship be less anxious about spreading germs. We acknowledge that this will make it difficult for some people to understand what is being said. It is important not to compensate by using a “stage whisper” voice. Stage whispers expel a lot of forceful breath, which would defeat the purpose.

Be sure to articulate each word carefully and keep the motions, gesture, and flow of the rite clear and intentional. People will be able to “hear” with their eyes. Congregations with the capacity to project words or to make them available for member’s electronic devices can allow those observing to know what is being said, even if they can’t actually hear the words being spoken. Members outside the range of hearing can still fully participate by praying silently for those being baptized, confirmed, or consecrated. God always hears us when we pray.

8. Use an immersion font, if you have one. CDC guidance indicates there is minimal chance of contamination by water, especially water in pools: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/water.html>
9. In warmer weather, congregations may consider performing baptisms outdoors, in flowing streams, lakes, or in beach settings. All physical distancing recommendations for gatherings apply: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html>
10. Administer anointing oil carefully. If anointing more than one candidate, ministers should disinfect their hands again before touching the oil and after anointing each additional candidate.
11. Greet the newly baptized with vigorous applause to welcome them into the Church.
12. See guidance on [laying on of hands](#). The presider and other participants such as sponsors (not part of the same household) will refrain from other physical gestures of greeting or welcome, such as kisses, handshakes, or embraces. See recommendations for alternative gestures for the [Exchange of Peace](#).

## CONFIRMATION

- See guidance on [laying on of hands](#).
- Anointing oil may be administered as in baptism.
- Although some rubrics allow for “other persons” to join the pastor in the action of laying on of hands, limit the liturgical action to the presiding minister while others stand at a safe distance.
- As with baptisms, limit the number of persons being confirmed at one time. Maintain physical distancing between all parties except during the parts of the rite that require physical touching (laying on of hands and anointing).
- Postpone confirmation if representatives from the congregation are unable to gather. If local and state ordinances allow for gatherings of 10 or more, encourage the participation of representative members of the body of Christ who have played significant roles in the lives of the confirmands (Godparents, mentors, sponsors, Sunday School teachers, children’s ministers).
- Invite all in attendance to affirm the confirmands with vigorous applause.

## WEDDINGS

The rite of Christian marriage is a public act of discipleship within the Christian community, whose members are its primary witnesses. During a pandemic, the number of people within a Christian community who serve as witnesses may be limited.

We recommend:

- Following state, local, or denominational guidelines for the number of persons who may be gathered and requirements for physical distancing except between the couple and persons living in the same household.
- The presider and other attendants wear cloth face coverings. The couple may choose not to wear cloth face coverings during the ceremony as long as they remain physically distant from others.
- The couple considers limiting the number of wedding attendants or choosing some number of attendants who are connected to the local congregation in addition to the presiding clergy to ensure that family members and at least one lay representative of the congregation can be present.
- All who speak during the ceremony do so with low volume.
- The wedding rite be live-streamed or unobtrusively recorded and uploaded, with appropriate copyright licensing as needed, so persons who cannot attend have the opportunity to witness it.

## FUNERALS

From the beginning of the Church, Christians have given loving, respectful care for those who have died. When Jesus died and was buried in a tomb, some of the women disciples visited the tomb after the Sabbath to care for his body. In a time of pandemic, churches must continue the holy work of care for the dead, while acknowledging the need for responsible limitations.

Traditional Christian rites of death and resurrection (commonly called a funeral) and committal (burial) are often distinct in time and place, but each is a proclamation of the gospel in the face of death. Memorial services, held at a later time without the body present, may combine some elements of each.

The funeral rites include elements that presuppose a separate rite of burial immediately after the funeral. Similarly, the rite of burial generally presupposes that the declaration of the gospel and the prayer of commendation have already taken place at the funeral. In the case of memorial services, death may have occurred at a much earlier time, but circumstances may have prevented a large gathering prior to interment.

During this pandemic, it may be unsafe and unwise to hold a funeral or a memorial service in person at all. This requires pastoral sensitivity.

Because of the particular professional expertise required for care for the dead, we recommend the CDC “Funeral Guidance for Individuals and Families”: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/funeral-guidance.html>

We also offer these suggestions about the rites themselves:

- When a funeral is not advisable, a rite of committal may still be possible, especially if it is held outdoors. The committal rite may be expanded by beginning with the reading of scripture, a very brief homily, and the commendation taken from the funeral rite.
- During the prayer of committal, the presider may touch the casket or other vessel. Afterwards, anyone touching the casket or vessel should disinfect their hands.
- Live-streaming or recording the service may be appropriate when limits on the size of gatherings prevent family members, close friends, and church members from attending.
- Given the added difficulty of arranging a funeral or committal during the pandemic, some people may prefer to hold a memorial service at a later time.
- When the danger of the pandemic has passed, the congregation might consider holding a church-wide or community service for those who died during the pandemic.

**SENSITIVITY TO CREMATION AS A FAMILY DECISION.** When a loved one dies, the decision about whether they should be buried or cremated can be difficult and emotionally and spiritually painful. The role of the church in this matter is to support the family's decision, especially if they find themselves needing to choose cremation when they or their loved one would have preferred burial.

Much in Christian theology has made churches and families reluctant about or opposed to cremation. Christians have long viewed the burial as the final act of respect and care for the one who has died. The laying to rest of a body imitates the placing of Jesus' body in a tomb following his crucifixion and death. Burial also anticipates participation in Jesus' resurrection and is an expression of our hope in the resurrection of the body (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20–22, 42–44).

To this day, some Christians still regard cremation as a violation of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Some see it as a rejection of belief in the resurrection of the body. Congregational leaders are called to take these concerns seriously and offer additional support where this occurs.

At the same time, many churches and Christians in recent years have become more accepting of cremation, recognizing that all bodies return to dust (cf. Ecclesiastes 12:7) and that God has the power to claim any deceased's remains for resurrection to eternal life. Ecological, social, hygienic, and economic reasons may also make cremation an appropriate option for many Churches and Christians. In the United States, funeral homes report that cremation is now the more preferred option.

Researchers of the novel coronavirus strongly suspect that a person who has died of COVID-19 remains contagious, thus putting at risk those who prepare human bodies for burial. Under these circumstances, cremation of the dead may be more likely to preserve the health of the living.

Given restrictions on the number of persons who can gather to say farewell to a loved one, some families are choosing to delay funeral and committal services until it is safe to do so. Cremation allows for this option.

For all of these reasons, clergy and congregations should support families in whichever option they ultimately choose for their beloved dead.

We commend these resources which the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have developed to prepare clergy and lay pastoral caregivers for ministry with families making these decisions:

*Ad resurgendum cum Christo* (2016): <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/10/25/161025c.html>

“How do Lutherans regard organ donation and cremation?” [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/How\\_do\\_Lutherans\\_regard\\_organ\\_donation\\_and\\_cremation.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/How_do_Lutherans_regard_organ_donation_and_cremation.pdf)

*In Sure and Certain Hope: A Funeral Sourcebook* (especially pp. 64–67): <https://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/product/9781506431451/In-Sure-and-Certain-Hope-A-Funeral-Sourcebook>



## After Gathering for Worship

The final movement of Christian worship on the Lord's Day is about sending the congregation into the world. Christian worshipers are not sent away from the assembly as individuals to pursue their own ends but as a refreshed community ready to continue their witness as the body of Christ in the world.

Three practices of the Christian community after worship on the Lord's Day especially reflect being sent forth as Christ's body to care for one another: extending the table of the Lord to those unwillingly absent, clergy and lay pastoral caregiving, and fellowship. All three have been part of the life of the church from the earliest centuries. Though the pandemic places constraints on all three now, with appropriate adaptations they may all continue as powerful witnesses of mutual care within the body of Christ.

### EXTENDING THE TABLE

As we think about any sort of gathering for worship and sacraments, we also need to ask: "Who is not able to be here?" Many people will be unable or find it unsafe to attend services of Holy Communion for some time. We may still include those who cannot gather with other members of the congregation by taking Communion to them from the same elements blessed in the physically gathered assembly.

As with all adaptations, we must consider additional details. This means taking care with the preparation of elements for travel. In form, this will adopt procedures that restaurants use for food delivery. But this is food that has become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord. Therefore, we need to offer Communion reverently.

Planning to extend the Table safely and reverently requires many steps. We offer this guidance as one way to make this ministry as safe and meaningful as possible.

1. The church will provide a way for those who desire to receive extended Communion to notify and schedule their visits. This helps ensure that sufficient Communion elements can be prepared each time for each household.
2. Assistants may prepare “Communion packets” with sufficient elements for each household member to be served.

## COMMUNION PACKET CONTENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

### Materials needed for each packet:

- 1 gallon-size clear plastic bag
- 1 quart-size clear plastic sealable bag
- 1 leak-proof glass or plastic container large enough to hold wine/grape juice for the household
- glass or compostable Communion cups for the household
- optional: a paper leaflet with a brief set of directions for receiving Communion at home

**Note:** take care not to contaminate the leaflet with hands that have not been thoroughly disinfected. Following a service of Holy Communion, set aside enough of the consecrated elements to serve the households requesting Communion.

Place the wafers or pieces of bread in the quart-size, sealable bag.

Fill the container with consecrated wine and seal.

Place both elements in the gallon-size clear bag, along with the leaflet if that is to be included.

**Note:** glass Communion cups may be cleaned after the service and placed in a bag for return on the next visit. As an alternative, compostable cups may be returned to the earth.

3. All assisting in preparing such packets wear cloth face coverings and use hand sanitizer immediately before beginning their work. The number of people preparing is kept to a minimum.
4. If elements are prepared for persons with celiac disease, these are handled at a distance from all other elements and by other persons with thoroughly washed and disinfected hands.
5. If an order of service for reception of the consecrated elements is not provided in the packet, this may be sent by electronic means to the household in advance.
6. If proper distancing is feasible, it may be preferable for the visiting Communion server to hold the Communion service in an outdoor location, such as a patio or yard. It is not necessary for members of a household to maintain distance from each other.

7. Persons who will be receiving the elements may prepare for their arrival by doing the following:
  - Prepare an uncluttered flat surface on which the elements may be arranged.
  - Place a clean cloth on that surface.
  - Find two small plates—one for the bread and one for the small cups.
  - Provide a phone number to the extended table administrator that the visitor(s) will use to announce their arrival.
8. Upon arrival, the Communion server, face covering on, may:
  - Call or text to announce arrival and wait for confirmation that a member of the household is ready to receive the elements.
  - Upon receiving confirmation, place the plastic bag on the doorstep or in front of the door, ring or knock, and then step back to a distance of 8 to 10 feet.
  - When a member of the household opens the door and retrieves the plastic bag, make a warm gesture to them, perhaps hands extended and a slight bow. If possible, the Communion server may ask how the household is doing and share any prayer concerns as appropriate, with attention to the need for confidentiality. Then say, "Peace be with you. The body and blood of Christ given for you."

## PASTORAL CARE

Christian clergy and lay caregivers are not Christ, but they act as Christ and for Christ, "The Good Shepherd," in all their work of caring for others. The very language of "pastor," the Latin word for "shepherd," points to deeply personal and physical means by which Christian clergy and lay caregivers offer care for others. To be a pastoral caregiver is to be physically present with people, to talk with them face to face, to eat with them, to pray with them in forms that may include holding hands, anointing with oil, or, where appropriate, an embrace. For those who receive it, the physical nature of their shepherding is an expression of "God with us," "God in human flesh."

The physicality of pastoral caregiving has always been supplemented by other means of showing care and offering guidance. As communication technologies have developed over time, clergy and lay caregivers have found ways to make use of them.

During the pandemic, we are grateful for communication technologies that can better transmit sounds and images of our presence to one another in real time.

Both caregivers and those for whom they care are also right to lament the loss of physical contact during these times.

We encourage caregivers to find means to support themselves and each other in ways that recognize what has been lost and what forms of physical presence with ongoing support by other means can help see us all through.

Until the threat posed by COVID-19 is truly gone, we do not commend resuming pastoral caregiving visits inside homes, hospitals, or nursing care centers except for very brief times and only when most necessary, such as near death. When such visits occur, we recommend that caregivers maintain physical distancing, wear cloth face coverings at all times, and use hand sanitizer before and after each visit. Avoid physical touch in these settings.

As local conditions may allow, we commend adding opportunities to meet care receivers in outdoor spaces, such as porches or yards, while still maintaining physical distancing, wearing cloth face coverings, and avoiding touch. Such outdoor settings may be especially valuable for meeting with children, who will have unique pastoral care needs in disrupted circumstances, and for meeting with families with children. They may also be a bit longer than emergency indoor meetings, but wisdom dictates brevity until more is known about the risks for transmission in longer outdoor exposures.

## STAYING CONNECTED

Relationship is key to the gospel and to what it means to be the Church. In the era of physical distancing, we are finding new ways of being community. When health, physical distancing guidelines, and/or underlying conditions prevent in-person fellowship, using technology in creative ways can help build new relationships and strengthen existing small groups and larger worshipping communities. In addition, technology can create pathways for new kinds of connections across differences.

And as the ability to meet in small groups resumes, though with some limitations such as distancing, cloth face coverings, and no or limited shared food, online means will remain critical ways to stay connected, especially for those who are at higher risk for severe illness.

As we stand in this place of needing both physical and technological means to support fellowship, we commend the following:

- Maintaining fellowship activities for groups larger than 10 primarily online.
- Providing online options for small group Bible Studies, prayer groups, or sharing groups that involve people who may be at higher risk or who are simply uncomfortable meeting at this time.
- Experimenting with one-time programs in both online and gathered formats.
- Connecting the people in worship gatherings with people in online-only services as intentional prayer partners or people on whose welfare they check. We recommend organizing this in advance so that those attending may bring prayer concerns to the worship service. Afterwards they can share the congregation's concerns with their prayer partners following the service by phone call or using online conferencing resources. Prayer partners may also be connected with the congregation's ministry of extending the table to those who must be absent.



## In Conclusion

Long ago, the prophet Micah asserted that what God requires of us is “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed our lives and our world. It has not, however, changed what God requires of us.

We offer this guidance to encourage church leaders to plan wisely and patiently when considering how and when we may again all gather for worship, study, fellowship, and sacraments.

This present moment calls for leaders of congregations, both lay and clergy, to step into the role of a moral leader and guide our people with the virtues of justice, love, and humility. In that spirit, let us provide care-filled attention to the well-being of all.

## The Ecumenical Consultation on Protocols for Worship, Fellowship, and Sacraments

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