

EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF SOUTHEAST FLORIDA



ON BEING FAITHFUL

Guidelines for a Shared Discernment on the Way Ahead in the Season of COVID-19

Executive Summary

On Being Faithful embraces the key principles of effective communication, subsidiarity, sustainability, liability and advocacy – principles that are best summarized, if not better articulated and incarnated in the notion of accountability. As the community of faith in Southeast Florida we are called to love the God who has created us in God’s image to become God’s likeness, incarnated in the human face of Jesus, who commands us to love God and our neighbor, both the one we see and more importantly the one we cannot see. Distracted by the deadly virus, we may have lost sight of the fact that we are this year marking the 50th anniversary of the founding of our diocese under the banner of *One Spirit, Many Faces*. This almost forgotten celebration invites us to renew and revitalize our ministries and mission for new and what are now significantly altered circumstances, to courageous witness in the face of all that feels counter-intuitive, and to a new and mutual accountability which affirms that under God we are *One Spirit, Many Faces*.

This document serves two purposes:

1. To offer Hope to our communities in this uncertain time,
2. To help us think through how we can imagine re-entry and gathering together again in our church buildings.

Our Diocese provides these guidelines that will govern how each church, school and special ministry moves forward through this time of COVID-19. Bishop Eaton will need to approve all plans at every stage.

We are encouraged to think of the process we will follow as a movement through a series of seasons.

These seasons are fluid. We might move into Season 2, and then back to Season 1 for a time. Even within each season, we'll make incremental changes as the public health data evolves and as we learn from our experiences.

This will take time. We can't simply open our doors and go back to the way things were. As the Church, our first priority must be to care for one another, especially the most vulnerable.

The process of re-entry will be local and data-driven. While we may be anxious to re-gather, we must be prudent and courageous in our leadership to witness to our faithfulness to love God and neighbor. One church might move into a new season sooner or later than its neighbors.

SEASON 1

Community Conditions

- *Widespread community spread of the virus, local cases are increasing
- *Overtaxed health system
- *Shortages of medical and protective supplies
- *Limited virus testing
- *Limited contact tracing

Church Requirements

- *Online worship
- *Online meetings, adult and youth formation, and other group gatherings
- *Church buildings closed to the public

SEASON 2

Community Conditions

- *A sustained reduction in new local cases for at least 14 days
- *Local hospitals can treat patients without a crisis standard of care
- *Everyone with symptoms can be tested
- *Contact tracing and active monitoring are in place
- *Systems are in place for targeted quarantines as needed

Church Requirements

- *Limited attendance, with reservations required
- *Six-foot distance between households
- *Face masks required
- *Temperature checks before entry
- *A visitor log will be kept
- *No congregational or choral singing
- *No in-person coffee hour or meals
- *Worship still available online; Adult/youth formation remain online

SEASON 3

Community Conditions

- *No community spread of the virus

Church Requirements

- *Resumption of sustainable normal

- *Mass vaccination
- *Mass therapeutic availability
- *Mass testing for infection and immunity
- *Lifting of physical distancing

activities with a new awareness of our connections and vulnerabilities

- *Many activities remain available online to allow those who cannot join in person to participate

What planning will these Seasons require?

Continue online virtual worship

Even when in-person worship is allowed, some within our communities will be appropriately concerned about returning. It will be helpful to continue practices developed during the stay at home orders, whether that is creating your own online offerings or encouraging the congregation to attend online worship offered by other congregations across our diocese and the Episcopal Church. Inviting others to engage with leading online worship opportunities will be a key component to this transition.

In-person worship

While physical distancing is in place, the return to in-person worship in a confined space will need to include;

- Keeping at least six feet between all persons who do not live in the same household.
- Wearing face coverings at all times, as a form of protection for others and a way of normalizing this practice for everyone.
- Making announcements at the beginning of worship to reinforce expected norms.

This spacing is also recommended for any contact our parishioners may have. No coffee hours or formation programs will be held in-person until we are able to gather safely. This is not meant to prevent people from talking to one another, but to reduce the temptation toward unsafe behaviors. The responsibility for keeping at least six feet between person lies with each individual. We can, however, name the norms for our gatherings, ask everyone to abide by them, and even request that people not participate if they cannot abide by them.

Changing the schedule and location for in-person worship

As a result of the limitations on the number who can gather and how much distancing is required, your worship space may not safely accommodate all who wish to gather for a liturgy. Adding additional liturgies or moving to a larger space (parish hall or outside), will help people keep safe physical distance. Decisions will be made as to how to accommodate those who wish to attend (reservations, alphabetically by last name, etc.) Ushers/greeters will keep a count on those in worship and how those arriving after the capacity has been reached will be directed to a later service.

Sanitizing church buildings and use by outside groups

Prior to resuming in-person worship, all common area in the worship space will be thoroughly cleaned. When in-person worship resumes, hard surfaces will be cleaned after each gathering and in between each in a series of worship services in the same space. There will also be a thorough final cleaning after all but the cleaning crew have left the church grounds. For groups that meet in our buildings, A.A., scouts, etc., a plan will be created for how they will use and clean the building after each use.

Greetings and Materials

As we gather for in-person worship, we may still need to use printed materials in order to make first time visitors feel welcome. Where possible, bulletins will be emailed to the congregation for downloading onto tablets or smartphones in worship. Greeters/ushers will staff a welcome table with the needed bulletins copies available for pick up. The greeter/usher can offer welcome, answer questions from a safe distance and even email or text digital materials on the spot. As possible, church doors will be kept open before and during worship to avoid people touching door handles/knobs. Worship bulletins that are hardcopy are not reusable. Masks and hand sanitizing stations will be available for members and visitors. Masks used are to take home afterwards.

Music

Various choral associations and public health officials have identified singing as a particular concern in the spreading of COVID-19 infection; singing can project virus droplets further than six feet. Choir and congregational singing will be suspended until it is safe to do so. The use of instrumental music or pre-recorded music is recommended for in-person gatherings.

Passing the Peace

Although the peace is often a time of social interaction, while social distancing measures are in place, we will practice touch-free greetings at the peace with no shaking hands and no hugging.

Offerings and Giving

The practice of "passing the plate" will be discontinued during this time. Offerings plates will be placed visibly within the community gathered. Offerings can be placed during the offertory in one location. Online giving or the mailing in of checks are strongly encouraged.

Worship services including the Holy Eucharist

Morning Prayer on Sunday mornings is an alternative to offering the Eucharist. If choosing to offer Eucharist, a plan will be created for safe administration of bread only at this time. There will be a minimization of person-to-person contact for administering the sacrament.

Persons/households can come forward keeping six feet distancing and return to their seats without getting too close to others. Face masks will be worn by all persons presiding and assisting. Consecration will be accomplished with minimal contact for reasons of safety. There will be no use of altar rails at this time for reasons of safety. Proximity to the communicant is a risk to the eucharistic minister and those receiving. Careful consideration will be given to make this as safe as possible.

Rites of Passage

Baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals may take place at the discretion of the clergy, in consultation with their vestry and the Bishop.

Bible study, faith formation, youth ministry

These gatherings are encouraged to take place virtually until it is possible to gather safely in person assuming all public health criteria are met. Face coverings and physical distancing are required.

Nursery care

Given the challenges of maintaining physical distancing in the care of young children in the nursery, this ministry will be suspended until everyone's safety from infection can be assured.

Office and building administration

Office function will be as limited as possible to ensure essential operations. Office staff and volunteers are required to wear masks. Office surfaces and equipment will be regularly sanitized.

Correct unsafe practices

Our safe practices are being communicated in advance as an expectation that each person is responsible for themselves. Some may stand too close to others or offer a hand to shake or a hug. This is going to happen. Every person has the gift and responsibility of offering a gracious word to guide those who struggle to change their habits/behaviors.

Plans and processes will be revisited regularly

Do–Reflect–Revise–Do.

It will be important as we return to in–person gatherings to reflect on and evaluate how our processes and plans are working or not working. Some procedures may have to change. An iterative process will be necessary to make the adjustments based on experience.

Questions Congregational Leaders will consider

These are the questions that congregational leaders are considering in devising plans for in-person worship. Each congregation will create a plan that is best for that setting and each plan will be reviewed with Bishop Eaton for his approval.

- How will you maintain online streaming and how will that need to adjust when there is also in-person worship happening?
- How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in family groups six feet apart 360 degrees?
- How will you discourage the receiving line after church and/or congregating after worship services?
- How will you cap attendance at events so you do not go over gathering limits?
- What should be done with small groups who have shifted to meeting online? How might you continue these when in-person worship resumes?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection with regard to communal spaces? Pews, chairs, doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in the building?
- How will you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?
- If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with the congregation and others who may have come into contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
- How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?

In Conclusion

These are indeed challenging times that require much preparation, wisdom, courage and patience. In the midst of this pandemic, let us adequately express our profound gratitude for all that our congregational leaders are doing to engage with the challenges of these new times. As we face each day and every new circumstance, never doubt that God is with us. If the resurrection of Jesus means that we can never go back to how things were, as his disciples quickly discovered despite their best efforts, the resurrection is God's assurance that there lies before us a future of unimaginable promise. As God is, so God calls us to act with courage and faith even with our doubts and in our worst moments. If nothing else, living through this pandemic invites us to explore and affirm our collective vulnerability: we can be our worst selves when we are afraid, or we can be our best and bravest selves. There is often very little distance between the two when we are fearful and vulnerable because when we are afraid our default position is self-protection. We do not have to be scary when we are scared. Let's choose awkward, brave, and kind.