



Considerations for Returning to In-person Worship

Being Church Together During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Updated May 12, 2020

Introduction

As ELCA congregations face difficult decisions regarding when and how they will be able to gather again for worship, this resource offers general guidance. Please note that this not a comprehensive, one-size-fits-all resource; it will need to be interpreted and adapted for your local context. In many, if not most contexts, it will not be safe or advisable to gather for in-person worship for some time. National, state, and local medical and legal guidelines will need to be consulted and followed. While risk is not avoidable, this guidance is presented with the aim of reducing the level of risk for your community. Your pastor and congregational leaders will want to carefully consider:

- legally binding orders
- the safety of the community and congregation
- recommendations from health officials¹
- recommendations from your synod office
- insurer loss-control recommendations and your insurance policy
- following state guidelines and federal guidelines for a three-phased approach to opening.² Of particular note are the criteria for moving from strict physical distancing (Phase 1) to a staged reopening (Phase 2):
 - (1) The number of new cases has declined for at least 14 days.
 - (2) Rapid diagnostic testing capacity is sufficient to test, at minimum, all people with COVID-19 symptoms, including mild cases, as well as their close contacts and those in essential roles.
 - (3) The health care system is able to safely care for all patients, including providing appropriate personal protective equipment for health care workers.
 - (4) There is sufficient public health capacity to conduct contact tracing for all new cases and their close contacts.

Be mindful that the “staged” or “phased” approach presented in a number of resources will likely not be a linear one; there may be times of gradual reopening as infections decrease, followed by restrictions if new waves of infections emerge.

In all situations, you will want to err on the side of love for your neighbor and know that change will be inevitable. Patience, grace, and flexibility will be necessary as you strive to make the most appropriate

¹ “Community and Faith-Based Organizations: Plan, Prepare, and Respond,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>.

² “National Coronavirus Response: A Road Map to Reopening,” American Enterprise Institute, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/national-coronavirus-response-a-road-map-to-reopening/>; “Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19: Guidance for Governors,” Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Health Security, https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf; and “Guidelines: Opening Up America Again,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>.

decisions for the people of God in your place at this time. In addition to worship planning, it will be helpful to spend time reflecting upon on what you have done online or in-person, as this time will likely lead to new insights and discoveries for your worshipping community.

Please note that resources in this document have been gathered from many sources, including several linked throughout this document. We are grateful to synod and ecumenical colleagues for the insights they have provided.

Part I: General Considerations

Preparation and Communication

- Assess the risks associated with decisions you will make about the timing and extent of returning to in-person gatherings.³
- When you prepare to return to in-person worship, and throughout this time, be sure to communicate clearly with your congregation through all appropriate channels, including: mail, newsletters, email, websites, and social media. Identify and address potential language and cultural barriers and barriers associated with having different abilities so that all can access the information you need to communicate.
- Review the church's membership rolls and designate leaders or teams to check in on members in ways that are safe and appropriate. Make extra efforts to connect with those who live alone, have suffered loss and grief, are less comfortable with technology, or struggle with mental health concerns.
- Use clear signage that describes church policies and best hygiene practices.
- Follow guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting all spaces prior to people returning.⁴
- Ask people not to attend worship if they are feeling ill, have been exposed to COVID-19, have compromised immune systems, or are at high risk of exposing others. Let them know they are welcome to participate in other ways such as online worship and protect those at high risk from any social stigma associated with their decision not to attend.

Physical Building and Grounds

- Study what is possible or not for your worshipping community, including “drive-up” worshipping options where worshipers remain in their cars for the duration of the event. Consider initial small gatherings held outdoors (where this is an option). Research all applicable local fire codes and seek the advice of the local fire department.
- Determine if your normally-used worship space is the most suitable space in your building for gathering at this time. Are there larger rooms, such as a fellowship hall, if your worship space is small?
- Close spaces/rooms in the building where people do not need to be.
- Map clear routes of movement from the entryway into the worship space, and plan ways to maintain physical distancing while people move along those routes.
- As applicable, set HVAC systems to introduce fresh air into the worship space and/or open windows and doors to encourage fresh air over recycled air.
- Make preparations for restroom distancing. Limit the number who may enter at the same time, using tape on the floor for those waiting in order to maintain proper physical distancing.

³ See “The Importance of Risk Assessment,” p. 8, in “Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19,” Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Health Security, https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf.

⁴ “Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>.

- Do not provide nursery care at this time.
- Remove materials from the worship and gathering spaces such as bibles, hymnals, pens, information cards, welcome pads, children’s bags, etc.
- Remove any items made with soft/porous materials (rugs/chairs/cushions), if possible, to reduce challenges for cleaning and disinfecting them.
- Consider not handing out bulletins. Projection onto a screen may be an alternative in some worship spaces. If possible, pre-place bulletins in the sections where seating is allowed. This will provide another visual cue for physical distancing.

Hygiene and Safety

- Provide hand sanitizer at all entrances and in the pews/seating area.
- Clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces daily. Overall cleaning and disinfection should happen at regular intervals, especially after and between worship/events.
- Require face masks/coverings; have some available for those who arrive without them.⁵
- Continue to encourage good hygiene practices.

Physical Distancing

- Offer multiple services with fewer attendees instead of one or two services (see provisional timeline below).
- Encourage people to sign up for worship services in advance, up to a set number, while still allowing for a few new people to drop in. This will be helpful in maintaining a record of who was physically present in the event a case is identified and assistance is needed with contact tracing.
- Make preparations and plans for reorganizing seating when necessary. This is easier with flexible seating; fixed pews are more of a challenge. Use tape to close off rows in order to guide worshipers to sit at least six feet from each other, such as every third row. This does not apply to family members in a single household.
- Limit people’s movement in worship to reduce their occupying of the same air space and the likelihood of inadvertent close contact.
- Consider how ushers and greeters will guide those entering and exiting in new ways that maintain proper physical distancing.

Speaking, Singing, and Playing Instruments in Worship

- Singing together, even from a distance, is one of the riskiest behaviors due to the spread of aerosol and droplets that can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air. A cloth mask is unlikely to protect you or your neighbor. For more about communal singing at this time, see a webinar offered by the National Association of Teachers of Singing and others.⁶
- Similar caution applies to unison speaking, such as reciting the Lord’s Prayer and other communal speech.
- Like singing, playing a wind instrument initiates a spread of aerosol and droplets and poses a strong risk of infection.

⁵ “Recommendation Regarding the Use of Cloth Face Coverings, Especially in Areas of Significant Community-Based Transmission,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover.html>.

⁶ “A Conversation: What Do Science and Data Say About the Near Term Future of Singing,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q&t=1574s>, and “Church Music in the Age of COVID-19,” Wisconsin Council of Churches, <https://www.wichurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Returning-to-Church-Church-Music-final.pdf>.

- Consider how church musicians can best be supported financially and otherwise during this difficult time.
- Feature instrumental music and find other ways for worshipers to participate: for instance, clapping, moving in rhythm, or using small percussion instruments.
- When and where it is safe to do so, feature music from soloists or small ensembles, with the congregation praying through attentive listening.
- Use online worship opportunities and soloists or small ensembles to teach and learn new songs from the hymnal or other sources; have a song of the week or month and invite worshipers to sing it at home.
- Encourage members to order hymnals to keep and use at home, especially if they must continue to worship at home for some time.

Worship Practices

- Refrain from passing a collection plate or basket during the offering; have stations where people can place offerings and/or provide them with online giving options.
- Omit offering processions where others handle money/plates or communion vessels.
- Provide alternate methods of sharing the peace outside of family households. These could include the exchange of words, waves, offering a reverent bow, or using American Sign Language.
- Avoid greeting “receiving lines” at the door before and after worship.

Holy Baptism

- Keep baptismal fonts empty of water or, if they are filled as a visual reminder, discourage the practice of remembering your baptism by touching the water.
- Sanitize the font and fill it with fresh water before a baptism.

Holy Communion

- The practice of sharing in Holy Communion is not advised until well into the final phases of gatherings of 50 or more people (see below).
- Those preparing and serving communion should sanitize their hands immediately before distributing communion; doing so in view of the congregation may help in reducing anxiety.
- During the Great Thanksgiving, the presiding minister may stand back from the table and not further touch the bread and cup.
- Congregations should refrain from kneeling or standing close together at a communion rail or in a line.
- Wafers may be a safer option than bread during this time. A package of wafers can be emptied onto a paten with minimal touch. Bread requires more handling.
- Common cup and intinction are not recommended.
- If distributing wine in small glasses in trays, ensure that the glasses are spaced far enough apart to minimize people’s touching of other glasses.
- Communion in one kind may be encouraged. A chalice may also be filled with a minimal amount of wine, and communicants could reverence the cup while not partaking of the wine, still hearing the words “the blood of Christ, shed for you.”
- The use of pre-filled, disposable wine and wafer cups may appear to be convenient and safer but are not without risk; they are also challenging to open and may be cost-prohibitive.

Worship Leadership

- Worship leaders may not need to wear masks if they are over six feet away (an analogy for this would be public health officials who do not wear masks for press conferences when following

physical distancing protocol). Leaders may still choose to wear masks and should if they come into closer proximity with others.

- Presiding ministers should use a stand, chair, etc., for books rather than have these held by an assisting minister.
- Preachers and presiders must be mindful of physical distancing when speaking, especially because leaders need to project their voices.
- Leaders should refrain from greeting worshippers at the door before or after worship.

Part II: Provisional Timeline by Size of Gathering

The following guidance is organized based on the size of the in-person gathering. In general, keep in mind:

- Congregations will need to refrain from in-person worship until it is safe and advisable to do so; this may be longer than anticipated and decisions will need to be clearly communicated.
- Continuing to provide online resources, home worship resources, or other tangible connection is encouraged even when 50 or more can gather. This is for the sake of those 65 or older, vulnerable, or afraid to gather in person.
- During this time you are encouraged to hold [daily prayer in the home](#). Even when we cannot sing together in community, singing at home is encouraged.
- Congregational leaders need to know how many people their worship space can hold if they are worshipping in family groups and sitting six feet apart, and should manage movement into and out of the building and worship space.
- Be mindful of the workload of leaders if they begin to offer worship both online and in-person, as this will require additional preparation. Also, consider additional compensation for janitorial staff when more frequent cleaning is necessary.

No gathering in-person, complete physical distancing (Federal Guideline Phase 1):

- Worship remains online or in the home.
- Worship leaders conduct online worship from home.
- Use technology in a way that helps those participating from home feel like active participants rather than passive observers.
- See the ELCA's guidelines on "virtual worship."⁷

Church activities restricted to 10 people or fewer:

- Regular Sunday worship is held online.
- Leaders may begin recording in the church building/worship space (if they have been doing this from home) while maintaining at least six feet of space between people and a greater distance between those who are singing.
- The church building might be opened for individual prayer at prearranged times and with face masks and proper physical distancing (at least six feet).
- The church building may be used to conduct funerals or weddings but only for immediate family (fewer than 10 people).
- High-risk individuals (people over 65 or with underlying conditions), including staff, continue to shelter in place. Consider alternative in-person leadership if staff members are over 65 or have underlying conditions that put them at risk.

⁷ "Worship Resources," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," <https://www.elca.org/publichealth>.

- Bible studies and other small groups may continue to meet online. Staff might consider limited meetings at the church with appropriate physical distancing.
- Consider posting signs about noncontact greetings and refraining from shaking hands or hugging, as well as other practices or measures put into place.
- Churches will need extensive cleaning/sanitation prior to people returning to the building and between other in-person gatherings. Measures will be increased as groups grow larger than 5 to 10 people.
- Communicate with the congregation about preparations being made for returning to in-person worship when such worship is safe.

Church activities restricted to 50 people or fewer (Federal Guideline Phase 2):

- Review guidance above in “Part I: General Considerations.”
- Consider whether in-person worship is or is not advisable in your context (under 65, no underlying conditions).
- Institute increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church.
- Congregations with greater than 50 average worship attendance might want to consider additional services with cleaning occurring between services. Consider other small-group options as well.
- Maintain physical distancing in worship (at least six feet, excluding households). If the worship space has pews, limit one family unit per pew; keep empty pews between families.
- Close common areas (fellowship halls, church offices, coffee spaces).
- Refrain from communion, handshakes, passing offering plates, and handing out printed bulletins.
- Worshipers wear masks at all times.
- Consider other in-person leadership if leaders are over 65 or have underlying conditions that put them at risk.

Church activities open for more than 50 people (Federal Guideline Phase 3):

- Maintain increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church.
- Resume in-person worship with other members (insofar as they feel comfortable doing so).
- Continue online worship for those who still cannot gather.
- Resume communion, etc., with additional precautionary measures.
- Physical distancing may be relaxed and masks may become optional in some places based on various factors and recommendations from officials.

Suggestions and Links to Other Resources

ELCA.org/PublicHealth: Resources to help leaders and members stay connected and resilient during COVID-19. <https://www.elca.org/PublicHealth>

“Returning to Church”: The Wisconsin Council of Churches offers helpful guidance. <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/> Other information is available at <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/03/11/coronavirus>.

“Returning to Public Worship: Theological and Practical Considerations”: Guidance from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/covid-19/returning_to_public_worship_may_2020.pdf

On May 5, 2020, the Minneapolis Area Synod hosted a conversation with Dr. Michael Osterholm, Regents Professor, McKnight Presidential Endowed Chair in Public Health, and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota. You can find the link to this presentation at <https://mpls-synod.org>.

For more on congregational singing, see the website for the National Association of Teachers of Singing, <https://www.nats.org>.

Consult the following national and state resources:

“Coronavirus (COVID-19),” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/>.

“Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Pandemic,” World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>.

“National Coronavirus Response: A Road Map to Reopening,” American Enterprise Institute, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/national-coronavirus-response-a-road-map-to-reopening/>.

“Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19: Guidance for Governors,” Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Health Security, https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf.

“Guidelines: Opening Up America Again,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>.