



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

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Introduction

Galatians 6:9-10

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

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 small 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.

Throughout 2020 and into 2021, congregations have faced additional challenges: discerning when it is safe to regather and how to factor vaccination status of their members into decisions about meeting in person.

A care-filled response to these challenges remains 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, Presbyterian, American Baptist, and Roman Catholic traditions, among others, have gathered online in an extended consultation throughout the pandemic. We have brought to this consultation our 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 have participated in this consultation because we care about people and their safety. And we care about finding ways to gather in person in this new environment, ways that are rich with theological tradition and faithful in public witness.

As we enter the second year of the pandemic, our consultation has developed this updated resource to help congregations engage in their own care-filled work and difficult decisions about gathering in person as conditions may vary over the months ahead.

Friends, the pandemic lingers, but "let us not grow weary in doing what is right" as we "work for the good of all" (Gal. 6:9-10).

Physical distancing

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



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 the work God calls each congregation and ministry to undertake.

During this pandemic, love of neighbor requires careful planning and openness to flexibility in response to changing circumstances. 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, so 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 and our life together.

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 in our gatherings since the very beginning. This gathered body called itself a “fellowship.”

During a pandemic, gathering in person has required 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 these challenges 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 may flourish.

SACRAMENTAL LIFE

All 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 celebrate the sacraments out of obedience and love for Jesus and each other even as we acknowledge the present need for careful planning and decision-making.

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 health and the vaccination status of people who gather and worship, whether in our church buildings or in outdoor settings. We lament the pain and difficulty of these limitations, and we look forward to the day when we no longer have to wear masks and maintain physical distance from those outside our immediate households. We encourage congregations to include by other means those who may not freely gather in person as we navigate our way through this lingering pandemic.

...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. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³Jesus 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 the early days of this pandemic, the disease itself could be a cause for stigma. Now, vaccination status may become another. In order to be inclusive, we must 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 reflect 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 In-person Gatherings

Beginning Criteria	Outdoor	Indoor	Find Local Data:
A downward trajectory over seven days in the number of reported symptoms, confirmed cases, and/or positive tests for COVID-19 in the counties where our people live and work.	<p>Fewer than 20 new cases per 100,000</p> <p><10% positivity rate</p> <p><80% ICU beds full</p>	<p>Fewer than 10 new cases per 100,000</p> <p><5% positivity rate</p> <p><70% ICU beds full</p>	<p>https://covidactnow.org</p>

COMMUNITY CONDITIONS CAN CHANGE. If community conditions do not meet the indoor benchmarks, discontinue indoor gatherings until conditions improve to meet benchmarks for two weeks. If community conditions do not meet the outdoor benchmarks, discontinue all in-person gatherings.

POSITIVITY RATES DEPEND ON ADEQUATE TESTING. The Covid Act Now website will indicate whether testing is adequate in a local area. <https://covidactnow.org>

These general guidelines apply at every level:

- Stay at home if you are sick, and, unless you are fully vaccinated, self-quarantine if you think you may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 within the past two weeks.
- Regularly wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer, especially after touching frequently used items or surfaces.
- Regularly clean frequently used items and surfaces. The CDC continues to recommend disinfection (in addition to cleaning) for shared spaces in cases when there is:
 - high transmission of COVID-19 in your community;
 - a low number of people wearing masks;
 - infrequent hand hygiene; or
 - a gathering that contains people at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.
- Wear masks in public gatherings until the CDC no longer recommends them. In particular, the CDC encourages the use of masks in groups where vaccination status is mixed, such as multi-generational gatherings. Children under two, those with breathing problems, and those who are unable to wear a mask because of disability should not wear them.

SIZE OF GATHERINGS: As long as we follow these basic hygiene requirements and community conditions permit gatherings, in-person gatherings should be relatively safe. For the size of groups that may gather, follow CDC guidance and state and local public health mandates.

LENGTH OF GATHERINGS: Outdoor gatherings may be an hour or longer. Indoor gatherings may be 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the rate of air exchange. Maximum time indoors assumes at least 4 to 6 air exchanges per hour. Most buildings are rated for 0.35 air exchanges per hour. (Journal of the American Medical Association, 4/16/2021: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2779062>)

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/1z1l5q5ssl6faxgR2WBbPDHg_4kvp6YOS



Faithful Basic Practices

Beginning in late winter 2020, we temporarily closed the doors of our gathering places for worship. 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.

Though many of us have resumed in-person gatherings at some point, our commitments to love, embodiment, sacraments, inclusive hospitality, and beauty have remained unwavering. The context in which we express these commitments has changed over time, sometimes allowing us to gather, at other times calling us to pause at least some forms of gathering. In this new environment, wisdom also calls us to pay attention to the best that medical science (through **CDC guidance**) can teach us.

CDC guidance

Our guidance is based on ongoing consultation with the CDC.

And at this moment, medical science still 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.

WHEN DO THESE LIMITS END? As the rate of vaccination in the general public and in worship communities increases, the ability to resume activities that had to be paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic may gradually increase. The CDC and other public health agencies will be issuing regular updates on vaccination rates and public risk of infection for the foreseeable future. Congregations can help bring an end to restrictions by encouraging all their members who meet the requirements to be vaccinated as soon as possible.

UNTIL THEN? In addition to the basic practices already described, Christians will also pay attention to how they perform elements of worship that continue to pose a threat for those who are not vaccinated. We will:

- Limit physical touching to what Christian ritual requires, such as the laying on of hands at baptisms and confirmations.
- Avoid practices indoors known to spread the virus among unvaccinated people in indoor settings, such as congregational or choral singing, shouting, and playing wind instruments. While the CDC guidance issued in late April 2021 considers choral singing indoors safe for vaccinated people wearing masks, it still ranks choral singing indoors for those who are unvaccinated as “least safe.” See https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/pdfs/324153_choosingSaferActivities11.pdf.

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 denominational offices
- Guidance issued by the CDC along with federal, state, and local public health authorities



Resuming In-person Gatherings

Many congregations have resumed some form of in-person gatherings. Some congregational coordination teams have turned their focus to helping people in their communities schedule appointments and help with transportation to get vaccinated. For those needing guidance on forming these teams, see page 12 of our [previous guidance](#).

The challenges now are a little different. We see at least seven that will require ongoing attention.

1. STAYING THE COURSE

Many people are growing weary of ongoing limitations, such as wearing masks, no congregational or choral singing indoors, shortened services, and no “coffee hour.” We encourage church leaders, lay and clergy, to work together to encourage vaccination as it becomes available and to help their congregations stay the course with these necessary limitations for the common good.

2. DEALING WITH RESISTANCE TO BASIC PROTOCOLS

Some people in our communities or congregations may be resistant to following basic health protocols, such as wearing masks and maintaining physical distance for the sake of those who are not vaccinated. You will want to have a plan for gently reminding persons of such requirements to participate in in-person activities, and for inviting them to return when they are willing to follow them.

3. DEVELOPING IN-PERSON CONNECTIONS FOR THOSE ONLINE

During the pandemic, many in our congregations have become accustomed to online services and classes available on demand. Such online, on-demand offerings have helped some congregations reach people they would not otherwise have reached.

However, online “presence” has not been available for all people, leaving some with little or no way to remain in touch with the life of their congregations.

As the pandemic wanes, your leadership and pastoral care teams will want to find ways to maintain online offerings and to develop other opportunities for in-person sharing for those who do not have access to computer technology.

4. VACCINATION AND PARTICIPATION

Congregations will face difficult decisions regarding how vaccination status of individuals may affect who is able to participate safely in various activities of the local church. These decisions are fraught with the social realities in our communities. Many persons lack access to the tools they need to schedule a vaccine. Others may lack flexibility in their employment, forcing them to choose between getting a vaccine or keeping their job. These realities disproportionately affect people who are poor, people of color, and people who are in rural areas where access to medical care may be limited. Furthermore, some individuals continue to be hesitant to receive the COVID vaccine for reasons that are deeply personal as well as social.

Just as congregations may come to different conclusions regarding public gatherings, congregations may make faithful, if differing, decisions about whether some ministries may be open only to persons who are fully vaccinated, while others may be open to all who are willing to follow basic safety protocols, or whether in-person gatherings will be delayed entirely until all can safely participate, regardless of vaccination status.

Our core principle is that, at all times, Christians will seek to act responsibly in the exercise of their faith as they fulfill their obligation to love their neighbors as themselves. Christians will refrain from judging the witness of others as long as others are not endangering the common good.

5. VACCINATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

New variants of the coronavirus are now affecting children more seriously and at much higher rates, but vaccine availability for young children may be unavailable for some time. Children are an essential part of our congregations, as are their families. We see the harmful effects of isolation on the physical and mental health of children, as well as on their social well-being. When in-person gatherings are otherwise possible, we strongly encourage congregations to find creative ways to include children through in-person opportunities, even if only for brief interpersonal encounters following CDC guidance.

6. FATIGUE IN CLERGY, STAFF, AND OTHER LEADERS

Many clergy, staff, and other leaders have faced higher levels of physical and especially emotional demand during this pandemic than at any other time in their careers. Levels of conflict and dissatisfaction within congregations have generally increased, and clergy and staff have sought to address all of it while nonetheless leading through uncharted waters. The results have been corrosive for congregations and exhausting and in some cases mentally and physically damaging for those who can once again lead them. (<https://livingchurch.org/2020/11/25/stress-compounded-for-clergy-in-pandemic/>)

We encourage clergy, staff, leaders, and congregations to acknowledge the reality of mental fatigue and physical exhaustion, especially as they navigate the transition to a new post-COVID normal. We should develop and implement processes for clergy, staff, and leadership renewal so that when we can gather in person, those who lead will be able to offer healthy leadership.

7. RIDING OUT THE STORM

As vaccination coverage increases, we are hopeful that COVID-19 will continue to wane over the coming months. We encourage congregations to remain cautious, to follow the basic public health protocols, and to make decisions about congregational gathering and activities based on sound data, which may vary from week to week.

Congregational leaders, such as a COVID-19 coordination team, will want to develop a communication plan about how worship and other ministries of the church respond to local and regional condition as the pandemic will probably linger to some degree for many months. While we encourage as much in-person gathering as possible given the health conditions, a clear communication plan will enable your congregation to understand the need to “ride out the storm” of the pandemic with patience. For love of neighbor, following the teachings of Jesus, let us commit ourselves to be part of the solution to this public health crisis.



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.

Rather than focusing on what still cannot be done at this time, or cannot be done the way it had been done before the pandemic, 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 innovations, 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 apparent. We must wear masks, and we must keep at least six feet away from people not in our own households. More substantial moments of direct physical contact required by some of our ritual actions should be preceded and followed by **disinfecting hands**, which makes such moments at least a bit more awkward. And because we know that substantially lower air replacement rates indoors increase the risk of transmitting the virus, we must continue to keep worship services indoors briefer than those held outdoors.

Disinfecting hands and surfaces

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.

Consistent with CDC guidance, we no longer speak of disinfecting surfaces, unless the area will be used by high-risk, unvaccinated persons.

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

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

There will still be complaints about the limits we must observe. People will want to do what they had always done and what had felt familiar before the pandemic. Some of what was familiar may have resumed. 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, singing, and prayer, you may spend more time on prayer itself and a bit less on preaching, and limit singing to soloists or carefully-spaced ensembles.

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 had worshipped and prayed—even as we are experiencing more of the vast array of gifts of the Spirit among us through the adaptations we are making.



Safer 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 ongoing requirements of spacing and briefer services, there will still be a need for the basic movements of worship to do what they do with as much clarity and power as possible.

None of our official worship books offers guidance for how to lead worship while wearing a mask or how to use hand sanitizer dispensers in a worship service. Yet, those of us who resumed in-person worship have learned to do both during the past year. We encourage all worship leaders to rehearse their roles while wearing a mask before each service. 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. Indoor spaces that are smaller with minimal air circulation and exchange are far more likely to foster transmission among unvaccinated people than larger spaces with more frequent air replacement. Outdoor spaces are almost always more safe for everyone.

As you consider plans for in-person gatherings, therefore, keep both indoor and outdoor spaces in mind. It may be more feasible to gather for outdoor celebrations than indoor gatherings. And an airy fellowship hall or gym with lots of space and frequent air replacement may be a better place to begin

indoors than a usual worship space. In short, 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 still face this disconcerting fact: The coronavirus is spread through breathing. Several recent studies have confirmed that forceful, sustained breathing, such as during singing by congregations or choirs and playing brass and wind instruments, pose a greater danger of spreading the coronavirus than ordinary speaking at regular volume, especially indoors, since air handling systems in most buildings, including churches, are not designed for the level of air replacement and filtration that make these activities safe. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2779062>

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

- Congregational and choral singing are possible outdoors, if it is safe to meet outdoors, and if all singers are masked, remain 6 feet from persons not in their households and 16 feet from others in the congregation.
- Singing by a soloist or a small ensemble (4 to 6 persons) is possible indoors, if it is safe to meet indoors, and if all singers are fully vaccinated, masked, remain 6 feet from each other, and 16 feet from others in the congregation.
- Congregations are free to participate with body percussion such as clapping, tapping their thighs, and stomping.
- Wind instruments may be used as solo or ensemble outdoors if covered with a bell mask. Wind instruments may be used as solo indoors if covered with a bell mask ([https:// www.conn-selmer.com/en-us/covid-resources](https://www.conn-selmer.com/en-us/covid-resources)).
- Non-wind instruments may be used, indoors or outside.
- Employ silence effectively. Consider using American Sign Language to sing a hymn or song silently.
- Keep up to date with ongoing research from reputable sources such as The Hymn Society of North America: <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 a Sunday service without preaching and praying. However, since these actions involve the voice, they have the risk of producing aerosols (droplets that remain suspended in air) that can spread the coronavirus, especially indoors.

With this in mind, we continue to recommend:

- Keeping services (including sermons) brief (30 to 45 minutes indoors, 60+ minutes outdoors).
- Encouraging all speakers to speak at a normal volume and, if possible, to use 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 *loud* congregational responses indoors.
- Projecting a full script of the service, including the sermon, for those who are hearing impaired if your congregation has projection capability.
- Wearing a mask while leading worship or preaching if indoors. If outdoors, worship leaders who remain at least 16 feet from all others may remove the mask while leading (but not singing).

HOLY COMMUNION

Many of us experienced a long pause before we could 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. At this time, if it is safe to gather in person, we believe it is possible to give and receive the bread and the cup, even if not in previously familiar ways.

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.

When indoors, we recommend that the pastor and other servers take the elements directly to the people at their seats rather than asking the people to form lines. We do not want people to walk through aerosols produced by others to receive the sacrament.

When outdoors, lines can be formed maintaining six-foot distances between different household and everyone else. However, it may be simpler for the pastor and servers to bring the elements directly to the people at their seats.

We offer the following suggestions:

1. One person who wears a face mask 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. If outdoors, the presider, if fully vaccinated and at least 16 feet away from others, may remove the mask. If indoors, presider and assistants all wear masks during the rite.
4. 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 regular volume to reduce aerosols. If possible, the presider should use a wireless microphone to keep hands free. The presider may approach the table briefly for parts of the rite that require touching or raising the paten, chalice, or flagon.
5. The congregation may say aloud the liturgical responses or unison prayers at a regular volume, or silently mouth the words to the liturgical responses and prayers.
6. The presider may be served the bread and cup as Church or local tradition indicates. If the presider receives first, the presider will use hand sanitizer again before serving others.
7. To serve the bread, the server may place the bread or wafer in silence into the opened palms of the one receiving, avoiding touching the recipient's hands.
8. To serve the cup, a pouring chalice or flagon may be used to pour the wine/juice into individual cups that may be picked up at entry or placed at seats ahead of time.
9. Another assistant may prepare consecrated elements for distribution to those unwillingly absent.

Masks

Until the CDC has determined that a sufficient number of the population has been fully vaccinated, including children, we still need to wear masks when we gather in person with others, indoors or outdoors. Church gatherings tend to be longer than 15 minutes, which is enough time to transmit the virus between unvaccinated people. Even though persons who are fully vaccinated are at low risk, our worship gatherings are usually multi-generational and may contain persons who are not vaccinated or who are at high risk. We send a clear message that we care for the health of all our neighbors, whether they are vaccinated or not, when we all wear masks at our gatherings.

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, ²⁴leave 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.

We still need to maintain physical distancing in public worship for the sake of children and others who may be unvaccinated. So, while the words may be the same, 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. This may be accompanied by a gesture of extending both arms to the assembly.
- Without speaking, the assembly may respond with a similar gesture to the presider, or say, at a regular volume, “And also with you.”
- When the congregation is invited to exchange the peace among themselves, they may do so without spoken words or physical contact using:
 - 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.

THE LAYING ON OF HANDS

Churches use the 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 **masks**.
- The ministers disinfect 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.

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 ways that may not require direct touch, the laying on of hands does require touch. Very brief proximity can be allowed for this important rite when all participants who are able to wear masks do so. Children under 2, those with breathing issues, or those unable to remove a face covering without assistance should not wear masks.

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 unvaccinated 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 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 distance from one another, only from the presider, unless all are fully vaccinated.

5. Encourage the presider to speak at a **regular volume** and avoid breathing directly on the candidate or sponsors through the face mask.
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.
7. When smaller gatherings for public worship are allowable according to 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. Use an immersion font, if you have one. The 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>
11. 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>
12. Administer anointing oil carefully. If anointing more than one candidate, ministers should disinfect their hands after anointing each candidate.
13. Greet the newly baptized with vigorous applause to welcome them into the Church.
14. See guidance on the **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**.

Regular Volume

The purpose of speaking at a regular 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 may 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, gestures, 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 members’ electronic devices can allow those observing to know what is being said, even if they cannot hear the words being spoken. Members outside the range of hearing can still participate fully by praying silently for those being baptized, confirmed, or consecrated. God always hears us when we pray.

CONFIRMATION

- See guidance for the [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. 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 masks unless all in attendance are fully vaccinated.
- The couple may choose not to wear masks during the ceremony and 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 should do so at regular volume.
- The wedding rite may be live-streamed or unobtrusively recorded and uploaded, with appropriate copyright licensing as needed, so persons who cannot attend may witness it.

FUNERALS

From the beginning of the Church, Christians have given loving, respectful care to 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. During the 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 later 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, depending on local conditions, 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 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.
- 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 it is possible to gather more people safely indoors or outdoors, the congregation may 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 may be 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 rejection of belief in the resurrection of the body. Congregational leaders should 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 the preferred option.

It is known that a person who has died of COVID-19 remains contagious for some time after death, thus putting at potential 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 in person to say farewell to a loved one, some families are choosing to delay funeral and committal services until it is safer to gather. Cremation allows for this option.

For all these reasons, clergy and congregations should support families in whichever option they 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

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 to send 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 some constraints on all three, 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 still be unable or find it unsafe to attend services of Holy Communion for some time. We may include those who cannot gather with 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 Christ. Therefore, we must handle the elements with reverent care.

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.
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 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.
 - If all are vaccinated, enter the home for a brief visit (15 minutes) to share the elements or share the elements and have a longer visit outdoors (30 minutes). If outdoors, masks are not needed. If indoors, masks should remain on except when receiving the elements.
 - If any are not vaccinated, indoors or outdoors, wear masks. The elements should be left with the recipients, along with the service order, so they may receive them in their home.
 - 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 word “pastor,” Latin 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.

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.

When community conditions mean it is safe to gather indoors, we commend resuming pastoral caregiving visits inside homes, hospitals, or nursing care centers for brief visits (less than 15 minutes). When such visits occur, we recommend that caregivers maintain physical distancing, wear face masks, and use hand sanitizer before and after each visit. Brief physical touch is possible when preceded and followed by using hand sanitizer.

When community conditions mean it is safe to gather outdoors, we commend adding opportunities to meet care receivers in outdoor spaces, such as porches or yards, while still maintaining physical distance, wearing masks, and offering brief touch. Outdoor visits may be longer (up to 30 minutes). Such 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.

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 has helped to build new relationships and strengthen existing small groups and larger worshipping communities. In addition, technology has created 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, masks, and no shared food, online means will remain critical ways to stay connected, especially for those who are not yet vaccinated, cannot be vaccinated, or 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:

- Maintain fellowship activities for groups larger than 10 primarily online.
- Continue to provide 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.
- Experiment with one-time programs in both online and gathered formats.
- Connect 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 in advance so that those attending can 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, online conferencing resources, or a personal visit. Prayer partners may also participate in 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 updated 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 continue to provide care-filled attention to the well-being of all.

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

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