

Regathering Guidelines for St. John's Church

Introduction

These guidelines have been shaped by the "Reopening Massachusetts" plan, issued by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; and "A Journey By Stages," issued jointly by the bishops of the dioceses of Massachusetts and Western Massachusetts. As a not-for-profit operating in the Commonwealth, and a parish of the Episcopal Church, we are bound to follow guidelines issued by state and diocesan authorities. All of the guidelines which follow that reference the "congregation" or "church offices" or "church buildings", etc., will also be applicable to the St. John's Thrift Shop: there will be one single set of guidelines for both the Church and the Thrift Shop.

As Rector, I also shared the following with the Vestry of St. John's Church as ways to guide the decisions we will be called to make:

--Jesus summed up the entirety of what it meant to be his follower as "Love God with all your heart, love your neighbor as yourself." We will continue to look to God as our strength, our comfort and our hope. And we will love our neighbor as ourselves. Loving our neighbor means looking out for them, caring for them, and holding onto something other than own individual needs or wants. And Jesus also closed a loophole in his Parable of the Good Samaritan by reminding us that everyone is our neighbor. Everyone.

Decisions we make should place on emphasis on how those decisions are loving actions towards our neighbors. All our neighbors.

--Jesus said we will be judged by how we treat the most vulnerable in this world: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." Churches have disproportionate numbers of persons who are in at risk categories. We also need to keep in mind you cannot know if someone is in an at-risk category just by looking at them.

Decisions should be based on an abundance of caution as a guiding principle, with the care and safety of people as paramount, especially the most vulnerable, without assuming or judging who is vulnerable or not.

Overview

These guidelines for St. John's follow the four phases by the Diocese of Massachusetts. These are:

- Stage 1: Stay At Home
- Stage 2: Cautious
- Stage 3: Vigilant
- Stage 4: New Normal

These are not stages that are fixed to a particular length of time. Rather all of these stages are based on public health benchmarks outlined in the longer documents issued by the Commonwealth and the

Diocese. It is important to note that this process may not be linear. We may move ahead to one stage, then back to a previous stage, depending on the public health situation.

Stage 1: Stay At Home

By order of the bishop, we are under this provision through July 1. In-person worship may not be held, and only essential church functions are permitted.

According to the Diocesan Guidelines, in Stage 1:

- Church offices are closed except for essential functions.
- Strict adherence observed for cleaning and hygiene measures, following CDC guidelines.
- Worship is live-streamed or recorded.
- Holy Communion is not distributed; virtual consecrations are not sanctioned.
- Cantor or soloist permitted, provided they maintain significant distance while singing.
- Baptism is performed only in emergency circumstances
- Pastoral care is offered via phone or online.
- Emergency assistance is offered to those most at risk.

Stage 2: Cautious

The diocese will announce when we can move to Stage 2 based on a series of public health measures. Some of these benchmarks include:

- At least 14 days of sustained decline in positive tests for coronavirus.
- COVID-19 hospitalizations, ICU bed use and deaths show ongoing decline.
- Rapid testing and contact tracing available to test all with symptoms of COVID-19.
- Significant limitations on size and type of gatherings continue under directives of government and public health authorities.
- Some businesses and institutions may reopen with limitations.

The following are parish guidelines for Stage 2:

- Holy Communion is not distributed; virtual consecrations are not sanctioned. We will continue to have Morning Prayer as our principal worship service.
- Church offices may reopen, and staff may return, in places where physical distancing can be maintained. Thrift Shop may reopen, with guidelines for physical distancing and with a maximum number of persons present (including staff and volunteers) at any time restricted to 40% of first floor occupancy.
- Nursery care and in-person formation programs for children are not permitted; children's formation and youth ministries are conducted online.

- Set HVAC systems to introduce fresh air. Open windows and doors in buildings to encourage fresh air over recycled air.
- Strict adherence to cleaning/disinfecting and hygiene measures, following CDC guidelines, with special attention to heavy transit areas and high-touch surfaces, e.g., doorknobs, restrooms, microphones and shared instruments.
- If it is known that an individual with COVID-19 attended a service or otherwise entered church buildings, a deep cleaning and disinfecting shall be conducted consistent with CDC guidance.
- If a place of worship learns that an attendee or employee or other worker has tested positive for COVID-19, it shall notify the local Board of Health in the city or town where the place of worship is located and assist as reasonably requested to trace likely contacts and advise contacts to isolate and self-quarantine.
- Consider necessary preparations for restroom use, including frequent cleaning and ventilation.
- Have a plan, signage, and/or floor markings for how attendees will be directed to enter, move about and depart buildings in ways that minimize risk.
- Give guidance about and enforce strict physical distancing, e.g., place tape or other visual distancing markings on seating to delineate six-foot separations, and post signage indicating the maximum number of persons permitted per row.
- Indoor or outdoor worship is permitted while observing directives on size of gatherings (maximum 40 percent occupancy for either indoor or outdoor worship) and physical distancing of at least six feet; members of the same immediate household are permitted to sit together and less than six feet apart.
- No congregational singing at in-person worship; cantor or choristers are permitted provided they maintain significant distance (20 feet or more in open, well-ventilated space) from one another and the congregation while singing.
- The Peace is to be exchanged without physical touch and at safe distances.
- No communal gatherings pre- or post-service are permitted, e.g., coffee hours
- Baptismal fonts are kept empty and sanitized.
- Baptism is to be administered in emergency situations only.
- Weddings and funerals may be held, observing public health directives concerning size of gatherings and protocols.
- Encourage hygiene measures for all gatherings, e.g., make alcohol-based hand sanitizers with at least 60 percent alcohol available, if possible.

- If feasible, arrange online sign-up for services in advance to monitor and limit the number of attendees.
- Require use of masks while inside and while entering and exiting places of worship or otherwise participating in in-person services, except where a person is unable to wear a face covering or mask because of a medical or disabling condition. For children between ages two and five, the wearing of a face covering or mask is at the discretion of the child's parent or guardian; children under the age of two should not wear a face covering or mask.
- Hymnals, prayer books and Bibles are removed; use projection screens or printed bulletins for worship.
- Worship continues to be live-streamed or recorded; higher-risk persons are encouraged to participate via these methods.
- Pastoral care to those, or by those, in higher-risk categories for contracting the virus continues to be restricted to phone or online contact.
- Encourage online giving; have offering basins placed in convenient locations rather than passing them among the congregation.
- Small group gatherings for those at lower risk are permitted, while maintaining strict physical distancing, sanitation and hygiene practices, and limitation of the size of the group as mandated by government and public health authorities.

Stage 3: Vigilant

The diocese will announce when we may move to Stage 3, when additional public health measures have been met. These measures include:

- COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths indicate near-zero community transmission of the virus.
- Rapid testing and contact tracing is widespread.
- Health care systems are well-equipped.
- Limitations on size and type of gatherings may remain but with fewer requirements.
- Many businesses and institutions reopen with some limitations.

The following are parish guidelines for Stage 3:

- Holy Communion is distributed as bread only, with careful attention to hygiene practices.
- Continued physical distancing, sanitation measures and mask requirements are likely.
- Observe a safety plan for how attendees will be directed to enter, be present in and depart the building.

- In-person public worship gatherings, weddings and funerals take place within requirements set by civic officials and public health guidelines.
- Worship may continue to be live-streamed or recorded; higher-risk persons are encouraged to continue to participate via these methods.
- Congregational singing at worship may occur where significant distance from one another is maintained and space is open and well-ventilated.
- Baptism may be administered, provided sanitation and hygiene requirements are followed, with use of a mask by the baptismal minister.
- Coffee hour and social gatherings may resume, provided physical distancing, sanitation and hygiene requirements are observed; individually packaged food items and beverages prepared by a server are strongly recommended.
- Confirmations and bishop's visitations may resume, observing directives about the size of gatherings and safety protocols.
- In-person pastoral care visits resume, provided hospital and care facility protocols are observed and strict hygiene protocols are maintained, and subject to consideration of any risk factors affecting the congregant or the visitor.
- Nursery care and in-person children's formation programs are not permitted; in-person youth ministries may resume provided all participants are at lower risk and all physical distancing, sanitation and hygiene protocols are strictly followed, as well as any restrictions on size of gatherings.
- Larger group gatherings may resume with care given to observe physical distancing, sanitation and hygiene practices, and in accordance with government and public health guidelines limiting the size of gatherings.

Stage 4: New Normal

The diocese will announce when we may move to Stage 4, when additional public health measures have been met. Stage 4 will be when there is a vaccine, widespread group immunity, and treatments with proven effectiveness. These benchmarks include:

- Most limits on gatherings are lifted and physical restrictions eased.
- Testing is widespread for virus and immunity.
- A vaccine is developed and is widely available to the public and/or treatment with proven effectiveness is standard.

The following are parish guidelines for Stage 4:

- No limitations on participants, though those at greater risk should always take extra precautions.
- Congregational singing at worship resumes.
- Pastoral care visits resume, employing learnings from the pandemic.

Additional Guidelines and resources follow.

Cleaning and Disinfecting Guidelines

CDC/EPA Cleaning and Disinfecting Guidance

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>

“Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.wichurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/disinfecting-building-facility-H.pdf>

MA Safety Standards: Places of Worship

http://www.mma.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Places-of-Worship_Circular-Checklist_Eng.pdf