



The Episcopal Diocese of Georgia

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Returning to In-person Worship

Following widely accepted guidance,¹ the Episcopal Diocese of Georgia will not move to in-person worship in a congregation until the counties in the region of the state in which the church is located meet the following conditions: 1) “the number of new [COVID-19] cases has declined for at least 14 days”² and 2) “rapid diagnostic testing capacity is sufficient to test, at minimum, all people with COVID-19 symptoms.” We will consider broader regions than the county level due to the mobility of the virus and the need to guard the safety of those who worship with us to the degree that is possible. Regions include Southwest Georgia, Coastal Georgia, and the Central Savannah River Area (Augusta). Your local community health district office is an appropriate source for information on availability of testing in your area. When these conditions are met, the Bishop may give permission to return to in-person worship following appropriate guidelines as outlined in this document. Even when in-person worship resumes, we will not “get back to normal” for some time.

What follows are points to consider in advance of offering in-person worship. The list is not exhaustive. It is meant to guide a Rector/Priest-in-Charge and Vestry as they plan to return to in-person worship. Setting expectations and sharing plans in advance, and encouraging everyone to adopt the new norms, will help make the return to in-person worship joyful, meaningful, and safe.

There is much that we do not know about the COVID-19 virus. We do know that each of our churches is unique. It will be up to each individual to accept responsibility for their own health and safety, and each person participating in in-person worship will do so at their own risk.

Public Health Guidelines

Before any plans are made, familiarize your Vestry with federal, state, and local rules that apply to your congregation. Also, stay abreast of Diocese of Georgia policies from the Bishop’s office. These policies will change in the months to come. What seems appropriate today or next week may not apply in a month or in six months.

¹ See the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security’s *Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19: Guidance for Governors*: https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/reopening-guidance-governors.pdf and the White House’s *Guidelines for Opening Up America Again*: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

² As determined by the Georgia Department of Public Health.

Continue Online Options

Even when in-person worship is allowed, some within our communities will be appropriately concerned about returning. It will be helpful to continue practices you have developed during the sheltering in place ordered by Governor Kemp, whether that is creating your own offerings or encouraging the congregation to attend the diocesan online worship. Do not automatically assume that continuing to provide everything you have been offering online will be sustainable for your personal workload. The Bishop and diocesan staff will continue to offer Wednesday at 6 p.m. and Sunday at 10 a.m. weekly worship for the foreseeable future to assist in this transition.

Worshipping Together

The return to group worship in a confined space will need to include:

- keeping at least six feet between all persons who do not live in the same household and
- wearing masks to enter and leave.

This spacing is also recommended for any contact our parishioners may have. Consider a coffee hour that does not include serving any food or beverages. This will not prevent people from talking to one another, but will reduce the temptation towards unsafe behaviors. We want people to safely interact with one another, yet we can't control behavior. The responsibility for keeping at least six feet between persons lies with each individual. We can, however, name the norms for our gatherings, ask everyone to abide by them, and even request people not participate if they cannot.

Changing the Schedule and Location of Worship

As a result of the limitations on the number who can gather and how much distancing is required, your worship space may not safely accommodate all who wish to gather for a liturgy. Adding additional liturgies or moving to a larger space, like a parish hall, will help people keep safe physical distance. Consider how you might divide worship services including asking A-K to attend one of the new options and L-Z the other. Also decide who will keep a count on those in worship and how you will ask those attending after the capacity is reached to wait until a later service.

Sanitizing the Church

Clean all hard surfaces before inviting others into the worship space. Plan for who will wipe down all hard surfaces in common areas immediately after any gathering and in between a series of worship services. There should also be a thorough final cleaning after all but the cleaning crew have left the church grounds.

Greeting and Handouts

We still need to provide worshippers with printed materials and to make newcomers feel welcome. Have a greeter, standing six feet away, staff a welcome table with the needed materials available for pick-up. The greeter can welcome folk and answer questions from a safe distance. To avoid people touching door handles/knobs, keep the church doors open during worship. Consider using handouts that can be taken home after worship or recycled, but not re-used.

Nursery

Due to the impossibility of getting children and infants to maintain appropriate distance in this setting, a nursery is not advised during any initial phase of in-person worship. You will need to advise parents who can consider when to return to in-person worship with their children.

Choir

If you have a choir, each member must maintain the physical distancing requirement. During this transition, consider forgoing a choir and simply use soloists or duets.

Passing the Peace

We need to have touch-free greetings at the peace with no shaking hands and hugging. Clergy and lay leaders in worship should model a wave or a bow while staying in place.

Offering Plates

Refrain from passing offering plates. In advance of worship, set the expectation of online giving or mailing in checks. Be ready with a place that individual offerings can be placed if your congregation seems unprepared for alternative forms of giving.

Receiving Communion

If you choose not to offer Eucharist, you may offer Morning Prayer on Sunday morning. Our experience suggests faithful Episcopalians expect the Eucharist, so put in place a plan for safe administration. Think through how you will minimize person-to-person contact for administering the sacrament; how you will sanitize and re-sanitize while you administer the sacrament; and, how you will orchestrate your movements. This will vary for each congregation and space. Consider how persons can come one at a time and return to their seat without getting too close to others.

Correct Unsafe Practices

Some parishioners will stand too close to others, offer a hand to shake, or a hug. It is going to happen. Teach everyone the safe practices you intend to keep, in advance. Remind your congregation that each person is responsible for themselves. Give parishioners or vestry persons who have the gift of offering a gracious word the task of giving guidance to those who struggle to change their behavior. Consider that some parishioners may need to be gently encouraged to stay home a little longer.

Revisit the Plan Regularly

Our Church Development Institute teaches leaders the model of Do-Reflect-Do. This will be important as we return to in-person gatherings. Make a plan, carry it out, and then have a follow up meeting to reflect on how it went and what needs to change. An iterative process will be necessary to make the adjustments based on experience.