

★ The Episcopal Diocese of Texas

UPDATED GUIDELINES FOR CONGREGATIONS

September 2020

WORSHIP

On-Line Worship – Best Practices

This virtual church hub on the diocesan website includes resources and best practices:

<https://www.epicenter.org/virtual-church/>

This webpage, curated by Lifelong Learning at the Virginia Theological Seminary, includes resources for digital offerings:

<https://eformationvts.org/community-online/>

The Small Church Network virtual gathering on September 27/28, with a presentation by the diocesan communications team on On-Line Community, will have resources posted, after the gathering, on the Small Church Network webpage:

<https://www.epicenter.org/resources/small-church-network/>

Many congregations have adapted well to on-line worship. Check out what other congregations are doing; share resources and experiences within clergy and peer groups. Everyone is still learning from each other and adapting in their local contexts.

General Worship Guidelines

Communion wafers are to be distributed at the usual time in the liturgy, not at the end, and not on the way out the door.

Wafers are not to be distributed in baggies or envelopes or in pre-packaged plastic containers.

Wafers are to be distributed with the clergy person and worshippers masked.

Bread, as in homemade bread, is not to be used.

No wine is to be distributed.

This means no wine in a common cup, no wine by intinction, no wine in pre-packaged plastic containers, and no wine in small individual cups.

During the prayer of consecration, a common cup is to be on the altar, with a small amount of wine inside.

At the time of distribution, only the priest may consume this consecrated wine.

The priest is to be masked during the leadership of the service, the prayer of consecration, and the distribution of wafers.

The priest or deacon is to be masked during the reading of the Gospel, the sermon, and the announcements – that is, unless distancing (minimum of 10 feet, since speaking right at people) can be maintained from the nearest person.

Laity in worship leadership are to be masked. They are to remain masked during the reading of the lessons and prayers of the people – that is, unless distancing (minimum of 10 feet, since speaking right at people) can be maintained from the nearest person.

If multiple persons are speaking unmasked and distanced at a minimum of 10 feet from the nearest person (such as the lector, then the preacher), they should speak from different locations (such as a lectern, then a separate pulpit).

Clergy who officiate at multiple services on a Sunday, and are exposed to many people, might wish to take a break from officiating in person, and, for the next week, to take care to protect others with whom they have had in person contact.

Indoor Worship

Prior guidelines stated a limit of 50 people per worship service.

Now, attendance limitations may be based upon the combined limitations of several factors, including maintaining of physical distancing of 6 feet between individuals/households, amount of space in the church, and adherence to the guidance of local authorities.

For some churches, this will result in a limitation on attendance to less than 50; for churches with a larger church building, it may result in a limitation of more than 50. For congregations who are just resuming in-person worship, it may be wise to start at 50 or fewer per worship service, then add from there.

Outdoor Worship

As in the courtyard or outdoor altar area at the church; or as in parks, yards, small groups not gathering at the church

Limits on attendance – none. The key is that everyone is masked and physical distancing of 6 feet between individuals/households is maintained.

Drive-In Worship

Similar to a drive-in movie, with audio of service broadcast on car radios, communion elements passed out to cars. This type of service is discouraged, as it individualizes the service, instead of a more corporate experience. Sitting in the car is private space, not corporate space.

Instead, consider holding this kind of service during good weather in the early morning or late evening, with people gathering in lawn chairs outside their cars in a parking lot, listening to an officiant up front, definitely being outside their cars to pray the Lord's Prayer together, then people distanced to receive the wafer.

Drive-By Worship

As in viewing on-line worship, then later driving by the church or parking lot to pick up the communion element of a wafer.

This is not allowed, for many theological reasons.

Spiritual Communion

As in a prayer of "Spiritual Communion" right after consecration of elements or with the post-Communion prayer, in an on-line worship service.

This practice has generated many questions; most liturgical scholars have taken more positions against this practice, rather than endorse it.

This practice confuses our understanding of the Body. Phrases in such prayers of "Spiritual Communion" emphasize the individual ("My Jesus" and "I cannot at this time receive") instead of emphasizing the corporate nature of Communion ("Our Father").

Virtual Eucharists

As in the priest consecrates communion elements on-line, while laity at home have bread and wine in front of their screen, to be "consecrated virtually" and then consumed.

This is not allowed, for many theological reasons.

Bishops' Visitations

As we begin to regather, in general, until further notice, the bishops in the Diocese of Texas will not be physically present for indoor worship services in congregations.

Bishops will continue to keep their original visitation schedule, and consult with rectors, vicars, and heads of congregations about "how to be with you" in worship, which could include outdoor in-person worship, or to be virtually present through a pre-recorded sermon, message to the congregation, participate in Facebook live, etc.

The bishops wish for their presence (on-line or otherwise) to be helpful and a source of comfort and solidarity with congregations.

Within the above constraints, the bishops will operate in accordance with the approved re-opening plans for each congregation and the guidance of local health officials.

In connection with the visitation, the bishop will schedule connection time with clergy and vestries/bishop's committees, mostly using virtual technology.

Confirmations

Confirmations and the physical presence of a bishop require a pastoral load and effort by clergy and the congregation, when we are just now beginning to regather in person. Therefore, confirmations may be considered on a case by case basis, with hope for more regular confirmations beginning in Advent.

Confirmations will take place in an outdoor worship service, taking into consideration the capabilities for physical distancing, with only the confirmands and one presenter/sponsor for each confirmand.

Everyone is to be masked and distanced.

Details will be worked out between the officiating bishop and the rector/head of congregation, in accordance with the approved re-opening plans for each congregation and the guidance of local health officials.

Ordinations

Limits on attendance – 50, yet this may be modified based on the size of the worship space, whether it may be conducted outdoors, and taking into consideration the capabilities for physical distancing.

Everyone is to be masked and distanced.

Details will be worked out between the ordaining bishop and rector/head of congregation, in accordance with the approved re-opening plans for each congregation and the guidance of local health officials.

Weddings – Inside the Church

Prior guidelines stated a limit to the number of people in attendance.

Now, attendance limitations may be based upon several factors, including maintain physical distancing of 6 feet between individuals/households, amount of space in the church, and adherence to the guidance of local authorities.

The couple should have a guest list available, in case contact tracing is needed.

Weddings – Outside the Church, such as the church courtyard

Limits on attendance – maintain physical distancing of 6 feet between individuals/households. Masking and distancing are key.

Weddings – Outdoor Venues, such as a commercial wedding site like a vineyard

Follow the local protocols for the site; the officiant must determine their own comfort level with the protocols utilized by the venue. Masking and distancing are key.

Funerals – Inside the Church

Prior guidelines stated a limit to the number of people in attendance.

Now, attendance limitations may be based upon several factors, including maintaining physical distancing of 6 feet between individuals/households, amount of space in the church, and adherence to the guidance of local authorities.

The family should have a guest list available, in case contact tracing is needed.

Funerals – Outside Locations, such as at the graveside

Limits on attendance – maintain physical distancing of 6 feet between individuals/households. Masking and distancing are key.

HOME VISITS

Homebound Visits, by the Clergy

Conduct outside, if possible. If indoor, limit time to less than 10 minutes.

Masking and physical distancing are key.

Other Pastoral Visits, such as at hospitals, senior living facilities

Abide by the local regulations.

Masking and physical distancing are key.

Home Communion, by the Clergy

Conduct outside, if possible. If indoor, limit time to less than 10 minutes.

No wine is to be distributed.

Masking and physical distancing are key.

Lay Eucharistic Visitors (LEVs) to Homes, utilizing LEV liturgy

Conduct outside, if possible. If indoor, limit time to less than 10 minutes.

Masking and physical distancing are key.

Communion elements, such as wafers, are not to be distributed in baggies or envelopes, and they are not to be mailed to the home or dropped off in the mailbox or front porch.

No wine is to be distributed.

Additional training of LEVs conducted by the clergy will be needed before lay eucharistic visitations can resume. In this training, there is to be a clear commitment from the LEV, regarding assurance of non-exposure to Covid-19 in the last 14 days, masking protocols, limiting of time of the visit to less than 10 minutes, preference for outdoors, no wine to be involved, care when distributing bread/wafer.

MUSIC

Consultation has been provided by Dr. Marty Wheeler Burnett, who is the President of the Association of Anglican Musicians, as well as Associate Professor of Church Music at the Virginia Theological Seminary.

Consultation has also been provided by the three music professionals on the Diocese of Texas Liturgical Commission:

Mr. Jackson Hearn – Good Shepherd, Kingwood
Dr. Monique Ingalls – Baylor University, Waco
Dr. Linda Patterson – St. Andrew's, Bryan.

From most sources, congregational singing indoors is still strongly discouraged.

From the Center for Congregational Song:

“As of today, we continue to err on the side of caution, not because we are fearful but because we are faithful. We believe that the health and lives of congregations across the U.S. are more important than any single act of music-making. God calls us to love and care for our neighbors. There will be a time we can sing together in our churches again, but the two studies [referenced in the source below] do not provide scientific evidence that it is safe for a congregation to do so right now. They should give us hope, but they should not give us permission. The scientists leading the studies have said as much. So please reference these studies and continue to look for updates. But do not be fooled or allow yourselves to read those studies as scientific proof that there are risk-free ways of singing together.”

Source: <https://congregationsong.org/covid-19-singing-an-update-based-on-current-research/>

Below is a link to the summary of current recommendations from the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) research project, the study sponsored by a coalition of music organizations, including the Association of Anglican Musicians (AAM): https://anglicanmusicians.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/COVID-19-Aug_2020.pdf

The key components to the recommendations focus on: masks, time, distancing, and air flow.

As additional results become available, the Association of Anglican Musicians will publish them on their website.

In mid-August, the Hymn Society summarized two recent research studies here: <https://congregational song.org/covid-19-singing-an-update-based-on-current-research/>

A takeaway from these two studies seem to confirm that singing is worse than talking, but not as bad as coughing or sneezing.

A second round of results, focusing on aerosol transmission and production, is here: <https://www.nfhs.org/media/4119369/aerosol-study-prelim-results-round-2-final-updated.pdf>

For soloists, choirs, and other musicians, given that our diocese is made up of churches of many different sizes and contexts, a “one size fits all” model might not be in order.

From the AAM updated recommendations mentioned above, singers and speakers should be distanced by being in the middle an imaginary 6 by 6 foot square; in the studies summarized above by the Hymn Society, singers should be distanced more than 12 feet. Distancing of singers can also take into consideration if the musicians are individuals, or members of the same household.

The issue of whether a singer/soloist should be masked may take into account several considerations, such as a very long distance (greater than 15 feet) from others, size of the space, time in the space, and ventilation and air flow.

Now that the weather is cooling down, outside performances and rehearsals by soloists and small choirs are becoming more of an option. Resuming singing within large groups is still a formidable challenge to do safely.

With music in worship, both indoors and outdoors, shorter worship services are better (around 30 minutes). Also, from what has been learned from offering on-line worship, attention spans of worshippers are less than with in-person worship.

With music in worship, both indoors and outdoors, issues of ventilation and air flow are to be taken into consideration.

In our diocese, with masking capabilities, and with a good amount of distancing, and with short spans of time, choir and groups of musicians are already creatively singing and offering their gifts in all sorts of ways: a small choir in an outdoor courtyard, or music offered by singers spaced out more than 15 feet apart, or by a children’s choir in a well-ventilated porte-cochere outside, or with a soloist situated on a faraway side of the church.

FORMATION, FELLOWSHIP, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Bible studies and Formation opportunities

It is important during these times to not only focus on worship, but also the many other areas of congregational life, such as providing opportunities for education and spiritual growth.

It is also important to offer fellowship opportunities, including in small groups.

Small groups can gather on Zoom. Yet also small groups are gathering in-person, for example: in neighborhoods, in lawn chairs, in cul-de-sacs, masked, and physically distanced as individuals/families.

Some congregations are offering robust formation and education offerings on-line this fall. For congregations that might not have such resources, this can be an ideal time for congregations to collaborate and learn together. Additional ideas can be found on the websites and in the e-newsletters of congregations around the Diocese.

The bishops in the Diocese of Texas are also working on ways to offer teaching opportunities in this more virtual environment.

This webpage, curated by Lifelong Learning at the Virginia Theological Seminary, includes resources for digital offerings: <https://eformationvts.org/community-online/>

Outreach and Social Justice Activities

The weekly news email from the Diocese includes many examples of ways that people and congregations are serving their community and peacefully making a witness. Additional ideas can be found on the websites and in the e-newsletters of congregations around the Diocese.

Food banks, blood drives, and even hurricane relief efforts after Hurricane Laura continue, with new protocols.

Continue to be in contact with your convocational representative on the diocesan Mission Amplification team regarding safe protocols in order to continue the outreach and justice work in our congregations.