

# An Initial Approach to Regathering

The Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina  
Updated September 2020



# A Letter from Bishop José

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

16<sup>th</sup> Century poet and priest, George Herbert, penned the hymn *King of Glory, King of Peace*. The last stanza reads,

Sev'n whole days, not one in sev'n,  
I will praise Thee;  
in my heart, though not in heav'n,  
I can raise Thee.  
Small it is, in this poor sort  
to enroll Thee:  
e'en eternity's too short  
to extol Thee.



Four hundred years later, we continue to learn how to be God's church all the time - "seven whole days, not one in seven" - and in remarkably new ways as we hold to the core tenets and practices of our faith and our Episcopal faith tradition.

In the Great 50 days of Easter, the 50 days after the resurrection, Jesus' closest companions failed to recognize him on multiple occasions. They and Jesus had moved into a place different and beyond their years of shared experiences of friendship and worship. They shifted into a space and time that no longer looked like before.

In 2020 we are experiencing a Season of Easter, fifty days, which is unrecognizable compared with our past in many ways. Ways of relationship, ways of worship, ways of gathering are unlike Easter Seasons before this one. We are experiencing a transformed reality that bears some resemblance to Jesus' closest companions after his death and resurrection. We must find new ways of being together, new ways of hearing our old stories, new ways of recognizing the Risen Christ in our midst, in one another, and in the world around us. Like those earliest companions, we are learning things about ourselves, about the Christ within and among us, and like them, this journey will not be simply a return to the past ways of being and knowing. The journey before us invites us into new and deeper places with the Risen Christ.

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 an eventual return to in-person worship joyful, meaningful, and safe.

Faithfully,

The Rt. Rev. José A. McLoughlin, Bishop of the Diocese of Western North

# About this Document

This document is the Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina's incorporation of several external resources. It also reflects multiple conversations with Deanery clergy groups, discussions between the Bishop and leaders from Executive Committee, as well as between the Bishop and the Standing Committee. In addition to these conversations within the Diocese of Western North Carolina, this resource integrates advice from Centers for Disease Control, Johns Hopkins University, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, the Church Insurance Company, the House of Bishops, and Episcopal Relief & Development.

This planning document is meant to guide a Rector/Priest-in-Charge and Vestry as they plan to return to in-person worship. These guidelines are not exhaustive and you may discern additional safety steps that work with your particular church context.

What follows includes guiding theological principles and a seasonal approach for determining a timeline. To begin, we suggest that your community works through the questions posed in this document (and questions you are considering specific to your community) and then communicates the plan you intend to implement to the Bishop.

There is much that we do not know about the COVID-19 virus. We anticipate that we will revise and reissue this planning document on a regular basis. What will remain constant is that any directives the bishop presents will always take priority over less restrictive guidelines provided by local or state municipalities. Likewise, 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.

If you need clarification on the recommendations, decisions, and questions in this guide, please contact [The Rev. Canon Augusta Anderson](#). We want to help and come alongside you during this challenging time.



# Guiding Theological Principles

The Diocese of Western North Carolina is the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement in Western North Carolina and we are called to participate in God's mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. One of the ways we engage in God's mission is to actively participate in all ways that help slow the spread of COVID-19 and keep people safe. As a diocese we trust that God is:

Forming us into a church that meets the challenges of a changing world.

Equipping and empowering us to boldly proclaim the Good News of God in Jesus Christ, God's love, and God's care.

Holy Scriptures teach us that the people of God journeyed as the Beloved Community in *stages and seasons*, a practice we continue in the Church. As a diocese, we believe a seasonal approach to regathering:

provides a vision for imagination about our new future as God's people.

helps our people understand the reality of our situation with more clarity.

begins to put into place adaptive missional options that could be used long term.

The Diocese of Western North Carolina is a community that faithfully walks in the Way of Love. As a diocese we will:

Rely on the Gospel values of trust, reciprocity, and gentleness.

Remain open to ongoing discernment and prayer.

Care for our most [vulnerable](#) parishioners by cautiously re-opening our buildings and resuming gatherings.

Comply with all laws and health directives of the State of North Carolina and continue to do whatever it takes to minimize a second wave of infection and death.

# Reflection and Discernment

In the coming weeks, every church in the Diocese of Western North Carolina is urged to reflect and discern when and how they return to in-person worship.

While the State of North Carolina guidelines allow for in-person worship, Bishop José is clear:

- Religious liberty does not supersede the higher moral, Gospel imperatives of love, mercy, service and justice. Regathering for in-person services and events in the Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina is not an entitlement but rather it is a gift. Furthermore, any process to regather should be guided by the best scientific research and medical advice to ensure that every child of God is treated with respect and care for their overall health and wellbeing.
- All clergy are encouraged to consider their own health as they decide offering in-person worship. No clergy person is mandated to provide in-person worship. All vestries are encouraged to consider the health and well-being of their wider congregation as they discern, together with their clergy, to offer in-person worship. *No church is mandated to provide in-person worship.* The Bishop trusts the judgement of parish leadership.

The following questions are offered as a way to begin holy conversations among church leadership. As you consider these questions, know that diocesan staff is available for support.

- With those in high-risk categories likely continuing to stay at home, how will you reach them and serve them during this time?
- Will you maintain an online streaming option once you are back together worshipping in physical space? How will that need to adjust when there is also in-person worship happening?
- Is your clergy comfortable returning to in-person worship?
- How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in family groups sitting 6 feet apart?
- Is there value in postponing Holy Communion? Consider Morning Prayer for the next several weeks or months especially if the safety measures required for celebrating the Holy Eucharist will be too much for your congregation to manage right now.
- How will you cap attendance at events so there is room for visitors to join you and so you don't go over guidelines?

- If you usually keep the doors of your sanctuary open to visitors during the week, how will you mitigate spread of the virus and ensure effective disinfection and sanitation?
- Will services need a reservation list and more logistical coordination? Who does that?
- Can you continue small group gatherings online?
- Can you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection of your church property?
  - Worship bulletin disposal, prayer books, etc.
  - Areas where small groups gather during the week
  - Nurseries and/or playgrounds
  - Pews or chairs following worship
  - Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building
- If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while still maintaining privacy and pastoral care? How will you welcome people who have recovered from a COVID-19 infection back into community gatherings?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
- How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?
- How will you pastorally deal with people acting out or ignoring protocol?
- How will you prepare your congregation in the event we experience a second wave and need to temporarily return to more assertive forms of distancing?

# Season 1 - Stay at Home - Phase I

Season 1 includes the State of North Carolina's strict *Stay at Home Order* and *Phase I*.

Following North Carolina's *Stay at Home Order*, and in recognition of widespread community spread of the virus, lack of availability of vaccine, therapeutics, and counter measures, and lack of protective supplies for general public, Bishop José provided a Pastoral Directive to all Clergy and parishes in the diocese with the following:

- Offer virtual worship from either Church or Home.
- Revise all Outreach ministries to follow safe protocols.
- No in-person pastoral visits.
- Graveside only funerals - 10 person limit.
- Weddings – 10 person limit
- Model mask wearing as an outward expression of love for self and other.

We want to emphasize that any phased reopening of our churches will not follow a linear track and in all likelihood, we will move back and forth between phases as directed by health officials and the State of North Carolina, including a return to *Stay at Home* restrictions, until a vaccination can be found and distributed. Sharing these expectations and all plans in advance, and encouraging everyone to adopt the new norms, will help make regathering for in-person worship joyful, meaningful and safe.

## Season 2 - State of North Carolina Phase II with Continued Mitigation

Following all guidelines and recommendations established by the State of North Carolina and our respective counties, the following restrictions apply to all Episcopal Churches in the Diocese of Western North Carolina:

1. No indoor, in-person worship will be allowed during Phase II. Clergy may continue to offer virtual worship from the sanctuary of their church with the understanding that no more than 10 people total involved in the liturgy.
2. Outdoor, in-person worship or other church events will continue to be allowed and I am increasing the capacity to no more than 50 persons. This is allowed only under these conditions: all people must wear masks and individuals and family groups are adequately spaced apart at least 6 feet or more. If your space does not adequately allow for 6 feet of physical distancing for every individual or household group, then you can only allow the number of people your space will safely accommodate. (Updated August 11, 2020)

### Recommendations for Season 2:

• [High-risk individuals, whether staff, volunteers, parishioners, or program participants should continue to shelter in place.](#)

• Churches with the resources to do so should continue using technology for online worship and meetings.

• It is appropriate to record worship from inside your church while maintaining appropriate physical distancing (6 feet for individuals or family groups), and for all people to wear masks.

• All outdoor, in-person groups are limited to no more than 25 and all people will wear masks or other appropriate face coverings. Experts suggest that the smaller the group, the easier physical distancing will be to maintain.

• Consider continuing to gather online for Bible studies and small groups.

• All levels of church leadership need to lead with knowledge and information to help our people cope with the changing nature of the phased community approach our health leaders will be taking.

• Summer chapel attendees and part-time out-of-town church members need to consider self-quarantine for a period of 14 days prior to attending in-person worship.



- In-person Vacation Bible School, summer mission trips or large outreach festival/events need to be evaluated to see if they meet the essential guidelines in this document.

- 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 your community plan regularly. 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.

- Following discernment with parish leadership and volunteers, Lay Eucharistic Visiting may resume to visit with people who are homebound or in the hospital in the following ways.

- The Rector or Priest-in-Charge must provide updated training to meet the safety requirements below.

- Lay Eucharistic Visitors are invited to call people and visit with them over the phone or computer to continue the contact and connect part of the ministry.

- All visits need the express permission of the homebound individual.

- All hospital and long-term care facility visits must first comply with facility regulations and directives.

- Lay Eucharistic Ministers will receive the Communion Kits from the Clergy.

- All Holy Eucharist elements will be consecrated by the Priest during a primary service and then organized into Communion Kits afterwards. The Communion Kits will be prepared by the clergy using gloves and masks.

- Lay Eucharistic Ministers are welcome to visit with people in person using the physical distancing guideline of 6 feet or more and the wearing of masks. No more than 10 persons may be present.

- Lay Eucharistic Ministers can share in the presentation of communion by using masks and leading the service. The bread can be left on a paten for persons to receive self-serve and wine reverently poured into individual cups in the same way. The Lay Eucharistic Ministers would lead the service.

- Disposal of leftover bread and wine would be done by the Eucharistic Minister.

## Season 2.5 - State of North Carolina Modified Phase 2.5

On September 1, 2020, Governor Roy Cooper announced that he is modifying North Carolina Phase 2 with [Executive Order 163](#). Under the terms of that executive order, North Carolina moves into Phase 2.5 of easing restrictions, effective September 4, 2020 at 5 p.m.

In light of the Governor's decision, the diocese is moving into phase 2.5 to incorporate the states' changes, beginning Friday, September 11, 2020. The modifications in the Diocese of Western North Carolina now include:

1. Indoor gathering capacity will be increased to 25 people in a single confined space.
2. Outdoor gathering capacity remains at 50 people in a single confined space.
3. In all indoor and outdoor gatherings, all people must wear masks.
4. In all indoor and outdoor gatherings, all family groups and individuals must be adequately spaced apart at least 6 feet or more. If your space does not adequately allow for 6 feet of physical distancing for every individual or household group, then you can only allow the number of people your space will safely accommodate.
5. Face coverings must be worn in public settings, especially where people cannot be six feet or more apart.

Outdoor gatherings are always preferred because fresh air flow slows the spread of the coronavirus. Please continue offering outdoor gatherings as much as possible before returning to indoor worship.

All clergy and Vestries should consider implementing additional best practices including:

- Temperature checks upon entrance to any gathering.
- Provide hand sanitizer and extra masks at every entrance to church property and worship space.
- Take attendance for all large worship gatherings in order to initiate contact tracing.
- Consider ways to improve fresh air circulation in all indoor spaces.

## Season 3 - State of North Carolina Phase III with Continued Mitigation

The guidelines for [North Carolina Phase III](#), as of May 21, 2020, allow for increased capacity in community gatherings:

Lessen restrictions for [vulnerable](#) populations with encouragement to continue practicing physical distancing

Allow increased capacity at restaurants, bars, other businesses, houses of worship and entertainment venues

Further increase the number of people allowed at gatherings

Continue rigorous restrictions on nursing homes and congregate care settings

[Federal Guidelines provide the following allowance under Phase III:](#)

LARGE VENUES (e.g., sit-down dining, movie theaters, sporting venues, places of worship) can operate under limited physical distancing protocols.

While both the State of North Carolina Phase III and the Federal Government Phase III do not offer further specifics about “capacity,” Bishop José will provide further guidelines for the Diocese of Western North Carolina when North Carolina officials offer more detailed information. For the time being, all Season 3 recommendations in the Diocese utilize a capacity of 25 persons as the standard for either indoor or outdoor, in-person worship.

# Decisions: Worship

When indoor, in-person worship services are permitted, the following must be put into place and considered:

- If your regular Sunday attendance is more than 25, plan for overflow contingencies and think through the possibilities of increasing the number of services, as well as reservation and tickets. We can help you!
- Decide who will keep a count of those in worship and how you will ask those attending after the capacity is reached to return for a later service.
- All people will wear masks or other appropriate face coverings. Consider how you can provide masks to people who forget, or who don't want to wear one. We can help you!
- Physical distancing remains (6 feet or more).
- Passing the collection plate is not allowed. Determine an alternative to passing the offertory plates. Think through the options for a central basket; if you have electronic and text-to-give programs continue and encourage their use.
- Passing the Peace is not permitted. All physical contact is not permitted. Consider inviting people to bow to one another, or trust that this entire aspect of the liturgy is accomplished by saying the versicle and response. Worship leaders cannot greet people at the back of the nave with hand-shaking and hugging; consider what this means and how connections can still occur.
- Please permanently drain and sanitize all holy water stoops and baptismal fonts.
- If you have a coffee hour, carefully think through the highest regard for food safety. Give yourself permission to re-introduce coffee hour later in the season.
- Consider avoiding entirely, or limiting, the distribution of printed worship material (leaflets, bulletins, etc.). Consider inviting people to bring their own prayer book and hymnal.
- If outdoor worship is offered, including the use of a tent, please continue to follow the guidelines outlined in this document.
- Consider having a service dedicated to those who are more [vulnerable](#) with even more extensive guidelines.
- Consider offering worship in smaller neighborhood groups.

- When you do decide to reopen Sunday nursery:
  - Preregister children to limit how many are in any room at a time;
  - Limit leaders in children's areas to those with no preexisting conditions and those under 60 years old;
  - All adult nursery leaders **must** wear masks;
  - Consider using temperature checks for each child.
  - Have a list of what has been cleaned and when in each room;

Note that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children 2 years of age and under do not wear masks or face coverings.

## Decisions: Holy Eucharist

If Holy Eucharist is celebrated, the following must be addressed:

- Plan on administering consecrated bread only.
- **Intinction** (partly dipping the consecrated bread into the consecrated wine before consumption) **is not permitted**.
- **Use of the common cup is not permitted.** Using a chalice for the Eucharistic prayer is acceptable but nobody should drink from it; consecrated wine can be reverently disposed of after the liturgy. Clergy are allowed to explore alternative ways to distribute wine, however the Bishop requests they share their plans in advance.
- Think through how to 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 approach one at a time and return to their seat without getting too close to others.
- Consult with a medical professional about using gloves; public health experts have suggested that what they've seen in some religious settings is not appropriate "glove technique."



## Decisions: Music

Singing has been identified by public health officials as a particular concern for spreading the infection. Churches are strongly encouraged to not include congregational singing in in-person worship. For more information, you may review these resources:

[Infection Control Today – “Churches could be deadliest places”](#)

[American Choral Directors – webinar resources](#)

[Transmission Perspective on COVID-19 and the Future of Singing](#), by Dr. Donald Milton, University of Maryland School of Public Health

[“A Conversation: What Do Science and Data Say About the Near Term Future of Singing,”](#) hosted by the National Association of Teachers of Singing

[Resources for Music during a Time of Quarantine](#), Virginia Theological Seminary

[When Can We Sing? Moravian Music Lecture led by Dr. Nola Reed Knouse](#)

- Consider a cantor or a duet spaced appropriately instead of choirs. Recommended spacing is 12 feet between individual singers. Singers must put face coverings back on after singing.
- The use of wind instruments should be suspended for now. All choir rehearsals are suspended.
- Organists and pianists may participate in live worship services. String players – violin, viola, cello, bass, guitar, etc. may also provide music.

## Decisions: Funerals and Weddings

- Life rituals (weddings and funerals) can occur while adhering to the 10 person limit for indoor gatherings and 25 person limit for outdoor gatherings continuing physical distancing plans.

- For both worship and life ritual gatherings, consider gathering contact information from all attendees. Recording names will enable the Health Department to more quickly trace, test, and isolate individuals who may have been exposed to COVID-19 if an attendee had the virus at the time they frequented the service or event.

## Decisions: Building Use

- Continue to work with property committees and vestries in maintaining and securing your buildings and grounds.
- Consider removing all non-essential items from rooms so that there are fewer surfaces to touch.
- Post signs indicating:
  - Masks or other face coverings required for entry
  - No contact greetings (refrain from hugging or shaking hands)
  - Physical distancing of 6 feet or more
  - Hand hygiene
  - Respiratory etiquette
  - Symptoms of this novel coronavirus and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
  - You can find signs here: [State of North Carolina Covid-19 signs](#)
- Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
- Provide anti-bacterial dispensers at all entrances (as you are able) to church facilities, especially worship spaces.
- Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.

- Determine how you will mitigate spread of the virus and ensure effective disinfection and sanitation if you keep the doors of your sanctuary open to visitors during the week.
- If you become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, put your communication plan into action, and cooperate fully with contact tracers.
- Consider the office functions: limit the number of people who gather, discourage visitors; ensure that everybody wears a mask, and that all surfaces, including the phones, are regularly sanitized.
- Staff and Volunteers:
  - Consider a temperature check on all staff and volunteers knowing that normal temperatures do not ensure that a person is virus-free.
  - Limit volunteers to those without preexisting conditions and those who are under 60 years old.
  - Instruct greeters on how to greet post-quarantine – no handshakes or hugs.
- Allowing building users/renters back indoors (12-step communities of fewer than 10 people) if they are able to observe gathering limits, distancing protocols, and mask use, and you are able to accommodate the cleaning needs.

# Additional Resources

We recommend the following resources:

- [Checklist for Community and Faith Leaders, CDC](#)
- [Episcopal Relief and Development](#)
- [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [Coronavirus: Safety Tips for Religious Organizations, Church Pension Group](#)

[The Coronavirus in America: The Year Ahead](#). New York Times, April 18, 2020.

[Church in these “VUCA” Times](#). Jake Morrill.

[24 Questions Your Church Should Ask Before People Return](#). Ken Braddy, Jr.

[The Search to Belong](#), by Joseph Myers explores the four spaces of belonging.

[Leaders, It’s Time to Ask Critical Questions About the Post-COVID19 Church.](#)  
[John Thornburg, United Methodist Insight, April 14, 2020.](#)

[Distributed Church](#). Fresh  
Expressions.

[How to Seize this Moment for  
Your Church](#). Ed Stetzer.

[The Employer’s Guide to COVID-19](#). Neckerman Insurance Services.

[Reopening a Business After the Coronavirus Shutdown](#). Neckerman Insurance  
Services.

[Cleaning and Disinfecting your Spaces](#), CDC

[Ten Steps All Workplaces Can Take to Reduce Risk of Exposure to Coronavirus.](#)  
[OSHA](#)