

EPISCOPAL

CHURCH OF NH

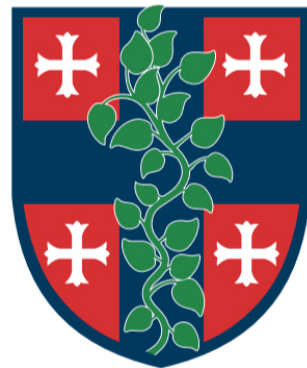


Following
The Good Shepherd
On The Path Ahead

From Bishop Rob

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:10

Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Easter: *O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen*



Dear Clergy and Lay Leaders,

As the state of New Hampshire begins to walk towards a gradual "re-opening" of the state – for business, employment, and services – while maintaining important public health measures to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, I am sharing this document to provide guidance about how we might think about "re-opening" our churches. While our buildings may be closed, the church is open – open to the presence of Christ in each other, online, in our prayers, and in the hard work and dedication of health care workers, grocery store employees, nursing home aides, mask-makers, food pantries, and civic leaders. The bad news is mounting – our ongoing grief at the death of beloved brothers and sisters and our fears about the loss of jobs and savings are undeniable.

But, we are Gospel people – people with good news who know that, even in the worst of times, Jesus is alive and walking the path with us, through this unfamiliar terrain.

Because of Jesus and his love for all, our personal, congregational, and diocesan lives are guided first and foremost by our love of God and our love for ourselves and others. As we make decisions about how to be the church and respond to these new challenges, our Presiding Bishop has implored us to ask: "What would love do?"

Yours in the Risen Christ,

The. Rt. Rev. A. Robert Hirschfeld
Bishop of New Hampshire

Guiding Principles

In this time of pandemic, guided by love, The Episcopal Church of New Hampshire will live by these principles:

- We will prioritize the well-being of our neighbors, especially those most at risk of contracting this virus, over our desire to gather in our church buildings.
- We will strengthen social connectedness and seek reconciliation with each other and our communities.
- We will continue to be attentive to the physical and social needs of those experiencing hunger, homelessness, isolation, and mental distress.
- We will adhere to the protocols, as currently defined, of Governor Sununu, State epidemiologist Dr. Chan, and other civic and public health authorities at each phase of response to the pandemic.
- We will continue to do whatever we are called to do to guard against additional waves of infection.

The principles and recommendations in this document are guided by the expertise of medical and civil authorities as well as by the theological foundation of the Way of Love. Specific recommendations and protocols may shift as we learn more and as the pandemic ebbs and flows. We commit to continuing to communicate changes and updates to these recommendations. As you implement these guiding principles, the Bishop and diocesan staff stand ready to partner with you.

New Hampshire Under the Stay At Home Order



Currently, New Hampshire remains in a state of emergency and under a “Stay at Home” order. In [Executive Order #17](#), on March 27, the Governor closed all non-essential businesses and ordered all citizens to stay at home until May 4 (businesses deemed essential were defined in [Exhibit A](#) and did not include religious organizations). On Friday, May 1, Governor Sununu issued [“Stay at Home 2.0”](#), in effect until May 31, which still requires non-essential workers and organizations to remain closed and working from home, but with new exceptions for certain industries (hospitals, hair salons, restaurants, etc.) who follow certain protocols, beginning on certain dates in May.

- New Hampshire is seeing between 50-100 new positive tests for COVID19 each day with more than 2,500 of our neighbors who have tested positive, and likely, more who are ill or who are carrying the virus with no symptoms.
- 70% of cases in NH are in people who are 40 or older.
- In comparison to other states, NH is doing a good job keeping the curve flattened and not outpacing hospital resources. It must be stressed, however, that we are currently at a sustained infection rate with no decrease in new cases.
- NH is steadily increasing testing – currently the state is conducting about 1,000 tests a day. In a press conference on Monday April 27, Governor Sununu said the state is aiming for 1,500 tests per day, hopefully in the coming weeks. He has deployed the National Guard to help with testing capacity and contact tracing.
- Case by case tracking for the state of New Hampshire by NHPR can be found [here](#) or at nh.gov [here](#).

What Does “Stay At Home” Mean for Our Church?

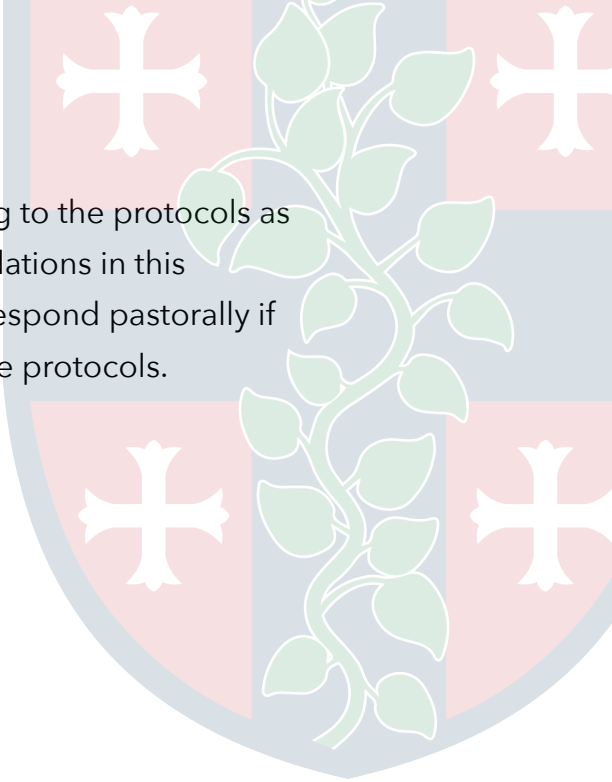
All churches in the diocese will continue to worship remotely while “Stay at Home 2.0” is in effect through May 31. Church staff should also continue to work from home, as much as feasible, with all church activities and functions moving online.

The top priority of our churches remains to strengthen our care for, and connection with, each other and with the most vulnerable in our communities. Churches should continue to operate food pantries, provide support for the homeless, or other critical care for our community – either online or with physical distancing, masks, sanitizing, and working apart.

Churches are encouraged to provide online prayer and worship opportunities and to join with the many worship opportunities already being provided online – the Liturgy of the Word with the Bishop on Sunday mornings, the Washington National Cathedral, or by “visiting” other local churches providing public online worship. More information and links are available at www.nhepiscopal.org.

Although there are regional differences in New Hampshire – for example, there are many more cases in the southern part of the state than in the northern part of the state currently – we also know that spring and summer bring a much larger population to the Northern part of the state, from places in the country and the world with high exposure to the virus. Therefore, the “Stay at Home 2.0” order applies to all. (As a leading epidemiologist colorfully quipped: “There is no separate peeing section in a swimming pool.” And we will have more “swimmers” as summer arrives.)

Church leaders are expected to “lead with love,” adhering to the protocols as currently defined by civic authorities and the recommendations in this document. Church leaders may need to discuss how to respond pastorally if members of a congregation find it difficult to abide by the protocols.



Criteria for Lifting the Stay at Home Order

In order for states to ease “Stay at Home” orders, the [White House has recommended](#) that the following “gating” criteria be met:

- Downward trajectory of influenza/COVID19 symptoms and documented cases for 14 days.
- Robust testing and contact tracing systems in place.
- Crisis care and treatment is available; hospitals are not overwhelmed.
- Clear and universal guidelines and plans in place to keep people safe.

The Governor has said that New Hampshire is moving quickly to meet these criteria by the end of “Stay at Home 2.0” on May 31. However, we do not know right now how long a “Stay at Home” order will remain in effect.

Nor can we offer specific dates when the following phases can be implemented. We will need to be prepared to move back and forth between “Stay at Home” orders, and Phase One and Two as waves of the virus may ebb and flow throughout 2020 and into 2021, or until a vaccine and treatment is widely available. This will impact our planning not only for in-person worship but for activities like summer camp, church fairs, Christian education, etc. Planning for all church activities should consider alternatives to in-person gatherings. Our “new normal” will likely continue to include options for simultaneous in-person and online offerings.

Phase One Reopening

When “Stay at Home” orders are lifted (and we do not know when this will be), a phased reopening for all businesses and organizations is currently recommended by civic and public health authorities. You can see the recommendations for the phases, and the conditions that would signal readiness for each phase, [here](#). This will be a delicate and pivotal time for our gradual reopening and should be approached with continued heightened caution.

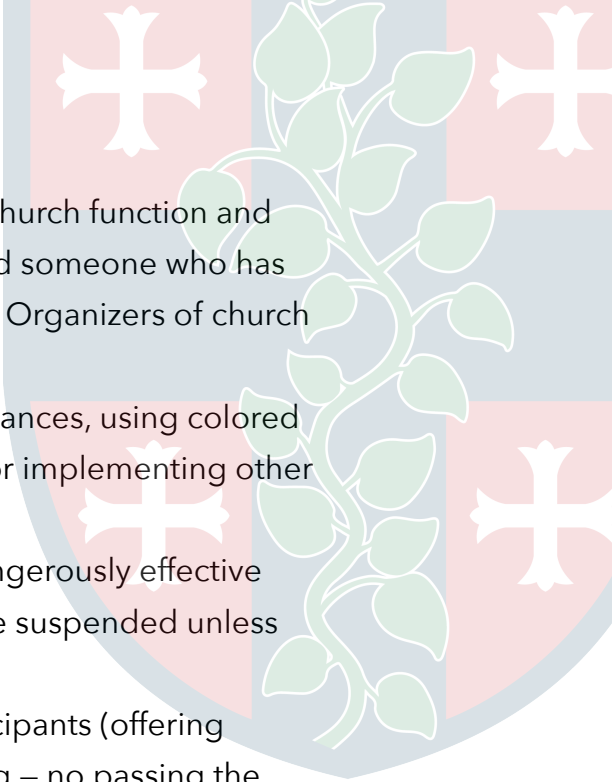
During Phase One:

- All gatherings will be limited to no more than 10 people.
- Vulnerable or at-risk people (people over 65 or with underlying conditions) should continue to stay home.
- Participants in any gatherings should be feeling healthy and should be cough- and fever-free. Anyone with any symptoms should stay home.
- Participants should maintain at least 6 feet of physical distance from each other.
- Participants should be wearing masks.
- Participants should be practicing vigilant hand washing and sanitizing.
- There is no distinction between an outdoor gathering and an indoor gathering.

What Does Phase One Look Like for Our Church?

We do not know when Phase One will be allowed. In advance of Phase One, church leaders should familiarize themselves with the requirements of a phased reopening. Detailed recommendations for faith communities at each phase from the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

- During phase one, individuals who are over 65 or who have conditions which put them at risk of serious illness if they contract the virus should continue to stay at home.
- Churches should prioritize addressing the critical basic needs of their neighbors for food, shelter, health, and social connection while maintaining the recommended protocols listed above.
- Churches should continue to share worship and prayer remotely with people in their homes.
- If a church has discerned that a group of under 10 can gather – for meetings, for critical ministry, or to support worship in some way – while maintaining all the appropriate protocols, this may be allowed.
- Sharing communion, hand shaking at the peace, coffee hour or other social gatherings, and group singing will not be considered safe practices during phase one.
- The church will need to find a way to make sure that no more than 10 people will attend a gathering and to turn away anyone beyond 10 people.
- The church will need to provide clean masks to anyone attending a gathering who does not have one. The church will also need to have plentiful hand sanitizing supplies readily available.

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- Churches will keep accurate lists of attendees at any church function and have emergency communication plans in place should someone who has attended a church function test positive for COVID19. Organizers of church events will cooperate with contact tracers.
 - Churches should make provisions to indicate safe distances, using colored tape, rearranging furniture, closing every other pew, or implementing other creative methods of encouraging physical distancing.
 - It has been determined that singing in groups is a dangerously effective way of transmitting the virus. Group singing should be suspended unless each participant can be more than 6 feet apart.
 - There should be no passing of objects between participants (offering plates, worship bulletins, etc.) or any physical touching – no passing the peace, etc.
 - If church buildings are going to be used by groups of any size, scrupulous cleaning and sanitizing systems will need to be in place for any areas that are touched or used – before and between and after use.
 - If church functions are offered outdoors, the same provisions for distancing, masks, hand sanitizing, etc. as elaborated above must be made.
 - Gatherings of 10 or under for “life rituals” (weddings, funerals) may be allowed, provided they follow the protocols articulated here.

Phase Two Reopening


At this time, we envision a phase two reopening that includes the following. (You can see the recommendations for all the phases, and the conditions that would signal readiness for each phase, [here](#).)

- All gatherings will be limited to no more than 50 people.
- Vulnerable or at-risk people (people over 65 or with underlying conditions) should continue to stay home.
- Participants in any gatherings should be feeling healthy and should be cough- and fever-free. Anyone with any symptoms should stay home.
- Participants should maintain at least 6 feet of physical distance from each other.
- Participants should be wearing masks.
- Participants should be practicing vigilant hand washing and sanitizing.
- There is no distinction between an outdoor gathering and an indoor gathering.

What Does Phase Two Mean for Our Church?

We do not know when Phase Two might be recommended. Detailed recommendations for faith communities at each phase from the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

- During phase two, individuals who are over 65 or who have conditions which put them at risk of serious illness if they contract the virus should continue to stay at home.
- Churches should prioritize addressing the critical basic needs of their neighbors for food, shelter, health and social connection while maintaining the recommended protocols listed above.
- Churches should continue to share worship and prayer remotely so that those who are vulnerable and unable to attend in person can still participate.
- If a church has discerned that a group of under 50 can gather, while maintaining all the appropriate protocols, for worship or for any other church activity, this may be allowed.
- Church leaders will need to make decisions about whether or not sharing communion, coffee hours, or singing can be safe practices.
- Churches will need to plan how to limit attendance to 50 people or less – by providing reservations, tickets, sign-ups, etc. – and for how to turn away anyone beyond 50.
- The church will need to provide clean masks to anyone attending a gathering who does not have one. The church will also need to have plentiful hand sanitizing supplies readily available.

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- Churches will keep accurate lists of attendees at any church function and have emergency communication plans in place should someone who has attended a church function test positive for COVID19. Organizers of church events will cooperate with contact tracers.
 - Churches should make provisions to indicate safe distances, using colored tape, rearranging furniture, closing every other pew, or implementing other creative methods of encouraging physical distancing.
 - The church should consider continuing to suspend group singing, and instead have duets or trios singing, spaced more than 6 feet apart.
 - There should be no passing of objects between participants (offering plates, worship bulletins, etc.) or any physical touching – no passing the peace, etc.
 - If church buildings are going to be used by groups of any size, scrupulous cleaning and sanitizing systems will need to be in place for any areas that are touched or used – before and between and after use.
 - If services or other church functions are offered outside, the same provisions for distancing, masks, etc. must be made.
 - Gatherings of under 50 people for “life rituals” (weddings, funerals) may be allowed, provided they follow the protocols articulated here.

Offering Holy Eucharist During Phase Two

The Church recognizes the genuine spiritual hunger we all have for the Holy Eucharist, and our deep, collective yearning for its return. The timing of Phase Two is unknown to us today. As we are able to come together gradually, many questions about when and how Holy Eucharist may be administered – from the consecration of the bread and wine to its distribution – must be addressed.

- How do we maintain appropriate physical distancing?
- How do people share in the Eucharist while wearing a mask?
- Should the celebrant wear gloves?
- May people bring their own personal bread and wine for consecration?
- How do we offer Holy Eucharist to the most vulnerable of our parishioners?

Each one of these questions is highly contextual, based on the size and composition of a congregation, current local public health concerns, and even the square footage and architectural design of the church building.

These are consequential questions and protocols, never to be undertaken lightly. As “Stay at Home 2.0” becomes “Stay at Home 3.0,” clergy, lay leaders, and the Bishop will discern the criteria and the steps required to reintroduce the Holy Eucharist. These decisions will need to be made on a case-by-case basis, requiring consultation with, and approval of, the Bishop.

Building Use Considerations During Phase Two

- Work with property committees and vestries in maintaining and securing buildings and grounds.
- Post signs indicating symptoms and urging all vulnerable individuals – people who are over 65, or with underlying conditions – to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
- Post signs requiring people to wear masks and maintain scrupulously clean hands.
- Maintain a supply of masks if people do not have one, and a good supply of soap, hand sanitizer, and disposable paper towels readily available.
- Clean the building regularly and between any uses, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.
- Churches will keep accurate lists of attendees at any function that makes use of a church facility, and have emergency communication plans in place should someone who has attended a church function test positive for COVID19. Organizers of church events will cooperate 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.
- Allowing building users/renters back in (music lessons, 12-step communities of fewer than 50 people) if they are able to observe gathering limits, distancing protocols, and mask use, and you are able to accommodate the cleaning needs.

Contemplating Church During This Time of Unexpected Quiet

This is an extraordinary time for reflection in our lives. Discerning what is essential, how is God calling us along new paths – toward light and community in Christ?

- Where are we seeing the gifts of creativity and innovation?
- How are we dedicating ourselves to our relationships with each other and seeing our love in action?
- How can we slow down enough to listen to what we are learning and how God is calling us into something new?
- What has it felt like to set aside the centrality of our Eucharistic worship?
- Are we being called to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters before returning to the altar?
- Are we in a time of extended “slow motion sharing of the peace” before we practice our reconciliation with Christ through Body and Blood again?
- How does our mission to live as Christ in the world remain, but, how are some of our fundamental assumptions about how we do this being challenged and changed?
- How can we foster habits of tenderness, humility, kindness, and gentleness with each other as we seek to return from our respective places of “exile?”

Recommended reading for church leaders: [“Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization is Now a Start-Up”](#)