

# Regathering Guidelines

## Focus of These Guidelines & Timing

This document provides guidelines and considerations for limited, in-person worship in parishes and missions in The Episcopal Diocese of Southwestern Virginia beginning to explore regathering when legally allowable in Virginia. Vestries will be asked to consider these guidelines and submit a Vestry approved parish plan for safety and regathering to the Bishop's Office. As parish leaders work on regathering plans, they should consider Dr. Erin Bromage's article ["The Risks - Know Them - Avoid Them."](#)

Given the need to carefully and adequately prepare for a transition to limited, in-person worship, the Bishop's advised start date of in-person worship is to be no earlier than June 10. Between now and the church's first, public in-person worship, the church will have the opportunity to consider these guidelines, submit an approved plan, and attempt a "dry run" of limited, in-person worship. The evolution of our regathering efforts will be based on our learnings and experiences over the next few months.

## In-Person Gatherings Beyond Worship

As we begin to explore regathering, focus will be on worship only. Gathering in-person at church for formation, Sunday school, children's chapel, youth events, childcare, coffee hours, meals, choir events, rehearsals, or other social functions should be considered non-essential and is discouraged during this early period of regathering. This consideration should apply to the entire summer at a minimum. Being that the staffing of parish offices is quite varied around our diocese, office arrangements will be relegated to parish leaders to manage in concert with all necessary safety protocols for their spaces.

## Basic Guidelines for Regathering

1. Limit close contact and maintain physical distancing. In worship this means:
  - A. Space seating of families and individuals sit a comfortable, 6-feet apart. (This includes forward and behind along with side to side measuring.)
  - B. Avoid choir, musical ensembles, and congregational singing.
  - C. Avoid sharing prayer books, bulletins, or other worship aids.
  - D. No physical touching during the exchanging of The Peace.
  - E. No sharing of the common cup. No intinction. No kneeling at altar railings to receive communion.
  - F. Avoid the passing of plates or baskets.
  - G. Guide the entering and exiting from the building to avoid bottlenecks and close contact.
  - H. Sit family members from each household together.
2. Capacity of church occupancy for limited, in-person gatherings should be determined by carefully measuring how families and individuals can comfortably sit 6 feet apart. This measuring process will give each church a maximum regathering number for planning. The parish might begin regathering with a lower

number.

3. Participants should bring and wear face masks while in the community to reduce their risk of asymptomatic spread.
4. Provide soap, hand sanitizer, tissues, and other helpful hygienic supplies.
5. Hold services in well-ventilated areas. Some parish halls might be better options than the Nave. Outdoors might be a consideration.
6. Clean surfaces that are frequently touched- such as pews, chairs, tables, door knobs, and implements around the altar.
7. Instrumental music or soloists might be considered as space allows.
8. Use a stationary collection box for checks and cash and/or electronic giving options.
9. Consider full-text bulletins or other alternatives to using prayer books in the pews.
10. Create a method for tracking attendance including a precise understanding of who is present: families and individuals. (Doing so will be critical if someone tests positive later.)
11. Create a crisis management plan for possible outbreak. Assess which community members are at higher risk and plan accordingly.
12. Encourage staff and community members to protect personal and public health by pointing them to resources online or by using signs in public spaces.
13. Train a crisis management team and/or staff and key volunteers in new safety and crisis management plan protocols.
14. Vulnerable populations of individuals older than age 60 and those with compromised immune systems or compromised lung and heart function should continue to attend worship virtually until the church transitions into another phase of regathering.
15. Ask those who are sick to stay home and seek testing for COVID-19. We will want to pray for them and follow up ensuring safe distancing and 14-day protocols prior to reentering offices and gatherings.
16. Offer online resources for Sunday School or other faith formation gatherings.
17. Children and youth formation leaders should continue to be in touch with [Pattie Ames](#) or [Jenni Faires](#) about evolving Safeguarding guidelines and formation resources.
18. Stay up to date on developments in your region and local community.

### **Vestry Leadership**

Considering a careful approach to beginning in-person gatherings affords the rector and vestry the opportunity to deeply consider how these guidelines will apply to their parishes in their local contexts. The vestry and other appointed leaders might consider participating in a Sunday dry run of in-person worship before other congregants gather in order to assess the effectiveness of their planning.

### **Submission of Parish Regathering Plans**

All parishes and missions must submit a regathering plan approved by the vestry prior to proceeding with in-person worship gatherings. No church may reopen unless that their plan has been confirmed as received and filed with the Diocesan Office. Please submit your church's regathering plan as a Word Doc or PDF using the following online form - [Regathering Plans Form](#).

## References

- Bromage, Erin. (n.d.) *The Risks - Know Them - Avoid Them*. Erin Bromage.  
<https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, March 12). *Implementation of Mitigation Strategies for Communities with Local COVID-19 Transmission*.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community-mitigation-strategy.pdf>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, April 30). *Interim Guidance for Communities of Faith*. <https://files.constantcontact.com/10b6bcd7001/579e510f-c2ac-4281-909b-97b116fdb04a.pdf>
- Commonwealth of Virginia. (2020, May 9). *Safer at Home: Phase One - Religious Services*. <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/governor-of-virginia/pdf/Virginia-Forward-Phase-One-Religious-Services-Guidelines.pdf>