



A Journey By Stages: Gathering, Serving & Growing as The Episcopal Church in Massachusetts During & Beyond a Time of Pandemic

*Pictured: The Midstate Trail extending through the center of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.
Photo: All Trails/Susan Serra via www.onlyinyourstate.com*

***From the wilderness the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages,
as the Lord commanded. Exodus 17:1***

***Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?***

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Isaiah 43:18-19

***Thomas said to Jesus, "Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"
Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." John 14:5-6***

Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
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Dear People of the Episcopal Church in Massachusetts,

This document is offered to guide clergy and vestries in some of the necessary conversations about the gradual process of regathering in our churches. Such planning will be guided by the principles and parameters offered here, encompassing the counsel of our elected and public health officials. The process will also need to reflect the particular context of each and every congregation. Saint Paul said, “All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial.” (I Corinthians 10:23) In every situation we must be guided not just by what is permissible, but by what will best safeguard the well-being of all God’s people.

The complexity of this document, and the process it foresees, may be daunting. It reflects our hopes for the restoration of cherished practices; it also reflects the loss we have experienced and the challenges we yet face.

Every congregation has been affected by grief and trauma in this pandemic. Every congregation has also experienced new ways of being Church. We have found “grace in the wilderness” (Jeremiah 31:2) at every turn: people who have not been in our buildings for any number of reasons are suddenly a faithful part of our online worship and fellowship; distances have been bridged; new relationships have been formed; commitment to the vulnerable has been renewed. That “wonderful and sacred mystery,” the Church, has indeed seen surprising ways in which “things which had grown old are being made new.” (BCP, p. 280)

Being made new, of course, is not the same as “returning to normal.” In fact, we will be called forward to something different – just as Christians have always been. We recollect, in Easter season of all times, that life was never the same for those who followed Jesus. Their normal life was not resumed after the Crucifixion, nor after Easter, nor after the Ascension. The promise of Pentecost was not far off as the disciples sheltered in place in a locked and shuttered room. But Pentecost also would bring more tremendous change. Christian faith is not centered on the status quo; it is about being transformed in, with and by God’s love.

This pandemic demands that we be distanced physically, but deeply connected and responsible to one another socially and spiritually. It demands that we love one another. Every guideline in this document is intended to reflect our need to love and care for one another in this extraordinary time. We extend our deepest gratitude to you – the leadership of our dioceses and all the people of our churches – for your creativity, commitment, patience, fortitude and devotion.

Faithfully in Christ,

The Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher
Bishop of Western Massachusetts

The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates
Bishop of Massachusetts

The Rt. Rev. Gayle E. Harris
Bishop Suffragan of Massachusetts



We will not return to normal.

The four stages which follow are general descriptions of particular phases of the pandemic, as well as the practices and requirements for church contexts we will need to follow during each one. Epidemiologists have already documented that church events, such as choir practices, funerals and weddings, have been a source of transmission of the virus to groups of people, so our decisions about how we gather are critical.

Everyone is encouraged to think of these stages as seasons of a journey that may take months or years, with both painful setbacks and hopeful strides in conquering this pandemic. We will not return to normal. Disasters and pandemics produce a new normal; expect to be changed and equipped for new ways of gathering, serving and growing.

The course of the pandemic will not remain static, so discerning when it is appropriate for a community to move from one stage to another is paramount. Almost certainly, these stages will not unfold in a linear fashion. Depending on resurgence or mutation of the virus, or the rise of a new threat to public health, a return to an earlier stage may be necessary.

Love your neighbor.

- Episcopal churches and organizations will abide by the directives of civic officials and the guidance of public health authorities. Clergy and lay leaders are to be well-informed about these directives from trustworthy sources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg Center for Public Health and public health leaders in Massachusetts. Everyone in our congregations and communities should be encouraged to comply out of love for one another, our neighbors and ourselves.
- Accommodation should be made for clergy, church staff and parishioners who are at higher risk for infection. This may include as much as 50 percent of the population, including persons aged 60 and over; those of any age who have underlying health conditions such as diabetes, heart or respiratory disease, or compromised immune systems; those who are receiving chemotherapy or radiation; those who are pregnant; and current or former smokers.
- Remember those who have challenges with connecting digitally. Many are connecting anew through online gatherings; make sure, too, to connect in other ways with those on the other side of the “digital divide,” respecting the limitations of different stages of the pandemic’s course.
- Should anyone associated with a congregation develop symptoms of COVID-19, they should consult their medical provider as soon as possible so that contact tracing can begin and church leadership can be informed by local public health authorities.

Context matters.

The local contexts of Episcopal congregations in Massachusetts vary greatly. We live in densely populated cities and small towns, suburban communities, seaside and mountain resorts and rural areas. The places we worship are varied as well: majestic buildings, small neighborhood churches, storefronts and summer chapels. So, too, with this pandemic, communities are affected to greatly varying degrees. Some have high rates of infection, hospitalization and death; others, so far, have been largely spared. This is not a one-size-fits-all plan for regathering. In each community and congregation we must consider how we protect one another and our neighbors, carry out the mission entrusted to us and offer our prayers and praises to God.

Will it feel like church?

Clergy and lay leaders will need to plan carefully with regard to what will deepen relationships with God and one another, serve the needs of neighbors and honor one another by reducing risk of transmission of the virus. Each congregation is to think prayerfully about what can be sustained during a particular stage of the pandemic. Consider appointing an advisory group to think through the limitations of each stage as it relates to your congregation, your buildings and your capacity to create a safe environment. In particular, the many limitations on gathering in Stage Two may be difficult for some congregations. It may even be preferable to continue with some of the practices of Stage One rather than trying to do everything in Stage Two. Just because it's permissible doesn't mean it will be desirable or sustainable, or that it will feel more like church! Give careful thought to what has worked well and what you've learned in Stage One before you give it up.

Get support!

We encourage clergy and lay leaders to bring your questions and ask for help with the implementation of these guidelines. Start by thinking things through with your own vestry or advisory group. Where you have questions, consult with your dean or with the person(s) designated in each diocese. There will also be opportunities to gather online to discuss these guidelines. Above all, we want to support one another as we travel this journey by stages together.



Stage One: Stay-at-Home

Public Health Indicators for Stage One:

- COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths are rising, at peak or plateaued.
- Capacity of the medical care system is under severe stress.
- Testing and tracing is not widespread.
- Effective treatments are being tested and research and trials on a vaccine are being explored.
- State of emergency or stay-at-home order is in place.
- Many limitations are placed on the size and type of gatherings.
- Required use of masks in public.
- Only essential businesses and institutions are open.

Church Response in Stage One:

Gathering

- Church offices are closed except for essential functions.
- Strict adherence observed for cleaning/disinfecting and hygiene measures, following CDC guidelines.
- Worship is live-streamed or recorded.
- Holy Communion is not distributed; virtual consecrations are not sanctioned.
- Cantor or soloist permitted, provided they maintain significant distance (20 feet or more in open, well-ventilated space) while singing.
- Baptism is performed only in emergency circumstances; the Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child may be used remotely.

Serving

- Pastoral care is offered via phone or online.
- Life-sustaining community services are offered, with strict safety measures, to address food and housing insecurity, mental health, addiction, the blood supply and other critical needs.
- Local leaders conduct initial assessment of pandemic impact on congregation and community.
- Consult with your insurance representative about your liability coverage in advance of re-opening buildings; revisit agreements and mutual responsibilities with renters and 12-Step groups.
- Emergency assistance is offered to those most at risk.

Growing

- Encourage online giving; access emergency relief measures.
- Plan for effective use of church properties and financial sustainability.
- Christian formation, “coffee hour” and other meetings are conducted online or by phone.
- Reflect, experiment and adapt.



Stage Two: Cautious

Public Health Indicators for Stage Two:

- At least 14 days of sustained decline in positive tests for coronavirus.
- COVID-19 hospitalizations, ICU bed use and deaths show ongoing decline.
- Capacity of the medical care system is no longer under significant stress.
- Rapid testing and contact tracing is available, at minimum, to test all with symptoms of COVID-19.
- Sufficient supplies of personal protective equipment are available.
- Significant limitations on size and type of gatherings continue under directives of government and public health authorities.
- Those at higher risk are urged to continue to stay at home.
- Some businesses and institutions may reopen with limitations.
- Refer to “[MA Safety Standards: Places of Worship](#)” in the list of public health resources at the end of these guidelines.
- If a place of worship learns that an attendee or employee or other worker has tested positive for COVID-19, it shall notify the local Board of Health in the city or town where the place of worship is located and assist as reasonably requested to trace likely contacts and advise contacts to isolate and self-quarantine.

Church Response in Stage Two:

Gathering

- Church offices may reopen in places where physical distancing can be maintained.
- Set HVAC systems to introduce fresh air and/or open windows and doors to encourage fresh air over recycled air.
- Strict adherence to cleaning/disinfecting and hygiene measures between each service, following CDC guidelines, with special attention to heavy transit areas and high-touch surfaces, e.g., doorknobs, restrooms, microphones and shared instruments.
- If it is known that an individual with COVID-19 attended a service or otherwise entered church buildings, a deep cleaning and disinfecting shall be conducted consistent with CDC guidance.
- Make preparations for restroom use, such as limiting the number who may enter at one time or using tape on the floor to maintain proper physical distancing.
- Help people return to church safely by having a plan and signage or floor markings for how attendees will be directed to enter, move about and depart buildings in ways that minimize risk.

- Give guidance about and enforce strict physical distancing, e.g., place tape or other visual distancing markings on seating to delineate six-foot separations, and post signage indicating the maximum number of persons permitted per row.
- Encourage hygiene measures for all gatherings, e.g., make alcohol-based hand sanitizers with at least 60 percent alcohol available, if possible.
- If feasible, arrange online sign-up for services in advance in order to monitor and limit the number of attendees.
- Require use of masks while inside and while entering and exiting places of worship or otherwise participating in in-person services, except where a person is unable to wear a face covering or mask because of a medical or disabling condition. For children between ages two and five, the wearing of a face covering or mask is at the discretion of the child's parent or guardian; children under the age of two should not wear a face covering or mask.
- Hymnals, prayer books and Bibles are removed; use projection screens or printed bulletins for worship.
- Indoor or outdoor worship is permitted while observing directives on size of gatherings (maximum 40 percent occupancy) and physical distancing of at least six feet (generally, every third row – block off unusable pews or provide adequate space between chairs); members of the same immediate household are permitted to sit together and less than six feet apart.
- Worship continues to be live-streamed or recorded to reach wider numbers; higher-risk persons are encouraged to participate via these methods.
- No congregational singing at in-person worship; cantor or choristers are permitted provided they maintain significant distance (20 feet or more in open, well-ventilated space) from one another and the congregation while singing.
- The Peace is to be exchanged without physical touch (a reverent bow or wave, or a greeting with words) and at safe distance.
- Holy Communion is not distributed; virtual consecrations are not sanctioned.
- No communal gatherings pre- or post-service are permitted, e.g., coffee hours or other food services.
- Fonts and holy water stoups are kept empty and sanitized.
- Baptism is to be administered in emergency situations only; the Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child may be used if safety protocols are observed.
- Weddings and funerals may be held, observing directives about the size of gatherings and safety protocols.

Serving

- Pastoral care to those, or by those, in higher-risk categories for contracting the virus continues to be restricted to phone or online contact.
- Community services for the most vulnerable continue with strict safety measures, including food pantries or other pre-packaged food distribution.
- Local leaders conduct detailed evaluation of pandemic impact on congregation and community.
- Make adjustments to ministry initiatives where needed.

Growing

- Encourage online giving; have offering basins placed in convenient locations rather than passing them among the congregation.
- Small group gatherings for those at lower risk are permitted, while maintaining strict physical distancing, sanitation and hygiene practices, and limitation of the size of the group as mandated by government and public health authorities.
- Nursery care and in-person formation programs for children are not permitted; children's formation and youth ministries are conducted online.
- Explore collaborations and partnerships with other congregations, ecumenical partners and local community organizations.



Public Health Indicators for Stage Three:

- COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths indicate near-zero community transmission of the virus.
- Rapid testing and contact tracing is widespread.
- Health care systems are well-equipped.
- Limitations on size and type of gatherings may remain but with fewer requirements.
- Many businesses and institutions may reopen with some limitations.
- Specific guidelines may be modified according to directives from civil and public health authorities.

Church Response in Stage Three:

Gathering

- Continued physical distancing, sanitation measures and mask requirements are likely.
- Observe a safety plan for how attendees will be directed to enter, be present in and depart the building.
- In-person public worship gatherings, weddings and funerals take place within requirements set by civic officials and public health guidelines.
- Worship may continue to be live-streamed or recorded; higher-risk persons are encouraged to continue to participate via these methods.
- Congregational singing at worship may occur where significant distance from one another is maintained and space is open and well-ventilated.
- Holy Communion is distributed as bread only, with careful attention to hygiene practices.
- Baptism may be administered, provided sanitation and hygiene requirements are followed, with use of a mask by the baptismal minister.
- Coffee hour and social gatherings may resume, provided physical distancing, sanitation and hygiene requirements are observed; individually packaged food items and beverages prepared by a server are strongly recommended.
- Confirmations and bishop's visitations may resume, observing directives about the size of gatherings and safety protocols.

Serving

- In-person pastoral care visits resume, provided hospital and care facility protocols are observed and strict hygiene protocols are maintained, and subject to consideration of any risk factors affecting the congregant or the visitor.
- Continue assessment of pandemic impact on congregation and community.
- Strengthen response to community needs.
- Prayerfully discern effective ministries and creative mission strategies.

Growing

- Nursery care and in-person children's formation programs are not permitted; in-person youth ministries may resume provided all participants are at lower risk and all physical distancing, sanitation and hygiene protocols are strictly followed, as well as any restrictions on size of gatherings.
- Larger group gatherings may resume with care given to observe physical distancing, sanitation and hygiene practices, and in accordance with government and public health guidelines limiting the size of gatherings.
- Disaster preparedness team is identified to liaise with the diocesan disaster preparedness and response team and develop a congregational disaster preparedness plan.
- Identify new collaborations and partnerships for mission opportunities.



Public Health Indicators for Stage Four:

- Most limits on gatherings are lifted and physical restrictions eased.
- Testing is widespread for virus and immunity.
- A vaccine is developed and is widely available to the public and/or treatment with proven effectiveness is standard.

Church Response in Stage Four:

Gathering

- No limitations on number of worshipers or participants, though those at greater risk should always take extra precautions.
- Congregational singing at worship resumes.
- Restrictions are lifted on sacramental worship and social gatherings.

Serving

- Pastoral care visits resume, employing learnings from the pandemic.
- Vigorous response to community needs continues.

Growing

- Disaster preparedness plan is in place for every congregation.
- Learnings from use of online, live-streamed or recorded gatherings continue to shape congregational life.
- Capacity for mission is strengthened, with ongoing, fruitful collaborations.
- New strategic vision for witness and service takes shape.



Cleaning and Disinfecting

CDC/EPA Cleaning and Disinfecting Guidance

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>

“Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.wichurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/disinfecting-building-facility-H.pdf>

Disaster Preparedness Planning

“U.S. Disaster Program Preparedness Resources,” Episcopal Relief & Development

<https://www.episcopalrelief.org/what-we-do/us-disaster-program/us-disaster-program-preparedness-resources/>

Liturgy and Music

Liturgy and Music Resources, Diocese of Massachusetts Liturgy and Music Commission

<https://www.diomass.org/inside/docs/liturgy-and-music-resources>

“A Conversation: What Do Science and Data Say About the Near Term Future of Singing,” hosted by The National Association of Teachers of Singing, The American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), Chorus America, Barbershop Harmony Society, and Performing Arts Medical Association (PAMA)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q&app=desktop>

Leadership

“Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization Is Now a Startup,” by Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker and Dave Blanchard in *The Praxis Journal*

<https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>

“Strategies for Winter: Redemptive Leadership in Survival Times,” by Dave Blanchard, Andy Crouch, Jon Hart, Scott Kauffmann and Jena Lee Nardella in *The Praxis Journal*

<https://journal.praxislabs.org/strategies-for-winter-redemptive-leadership-in-survival-times-f15a7791035a>

“Church in These VUCA Times,” by Jake Morrill (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouAKQXagwms&feature=youtu.be>

COVID-19 Resources, “Vital Practices for Leading Congregations” from the Episcopal Church Foundation

<https://www.ecfvp.org/blogs/3763/covid-19-resources-2>

“Concerning COVID-19,” Resources for The Episcopal Church <https://episcopalchurch.org/concerning-covid19>

“COVID-19 Response,” Massachusetts Council of Churches <https://www.masscouncilofchurches.org/covid-19-response/>

“Operational and Financial Guidelines for Congregations During the COVID-19 Pandemic”
<https://www.diomass.org/sites/diomass/files/documents/Operational%20and%20Financial%20Guidelines%20During%20COVID-19%20Pandemic.pdf>

Online Gathering Tools

Best Practices for Zoom Meetings, Building Faith at Virginia Theological Seminary
<https://buildfaith.org/webinar-thursday-march-12th-best-practices-for-zoom-meetings/>

“How To Use Zoom for Large Meetings” Tip Sheet
<https://www.diomass.org/sites/diomass/files/documents/How%20to%20Use%20Zoom%20for%20Large%20Meetings.pdf>

“How to Keep Uninvited Guests Out of Your Zoom Event”
<https://blog.zoom.us/wordpress/2020/03/20/keep-uninvited-guests-out-of-your-zoom-event/>

YouTube Digital Events Playbook
http://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/youtube_playbook_digital_events.pdf

“How to Create a Mobile YouTube Livestream” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2nFR-nxUCo>

“How to Use Live Control Room for Live Streaming on YouTube”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ok3qM3ecWJU>

Church Publishing Incorporated Permission Guidelines and Practices
<https://www.churchpublishing.org/contentassets/34d354ada2e7471facebbacbdba51603/covid-19-permission-guidelines.pdf>

U.S. Copyright Issues Related to Live Streaming Music
https://episcopalchurch.org/files/us_copyright_issues_related_to_live_streaming_music.pdf

Public Health and Reopening

MA Safety Standards: Places of Worship
http://www.mma.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Places-of-Worship_Circular-Checklist_Eng.pdf

“Community and Faith-Based Organizations Plan, Prepare and Respond,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>

“Is your community ready to reopen? Real-time modeling and metrics. All 50 states. 2,100+ counties,” CovidActNow.org
<https://covidactnow.org/>

COVID-19 Insights: Adaptive Response, with When to Loosen/When to Tighten Factsheets
<https://preventepidemics.org/covid19/science/insights/adaptive-response/>

“The Great Reopening,” Kara Miller Talks with Dr. Michael Osterholm, story by Elizabeth Ross, WGBH
<https://www.wgbh.org/news/national-news/2020/05/15/the-great-reopening>

“The Risks - Know Them - Avoid Them,” by Erin S. Bromage, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Biology, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20200511&instance_id=18384&nl=the-morning®i_id=78198987&segment_id=27239&te=1&user_id=dda95b2490e6bb62c41599d48dc7dc07

“Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19: Guidance for Governors,” Center for Health Security at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf

World Health Organization Decision Tree for Religious Communities
https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-2019-ncov-mg-decision-tree-religious.pdf?sfvrsn=f3433c0a_2

“Coronavirus: Safety Tips for Religious Organizations,” Church Pension Group
<https://www.cpg.org/globalassets/documents/publications/cic-coronavirus-safety-tips-for-religious-organizations.pdf>

Mental Health, Domestic Violence & Substance Addiction Resources
<https://www.diomass.org/inside/docs/mental-health-domestic-violence-substance-addiction-resources>

“Faith-Based Response to Epidemics,” Episcopal Relief & Development
<https://www.episcopalrelief.org/what-we-do/us-disaster-program/faith-based-response-to-epidemics/>

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