



A Pastoral Word from the Episcopal Bishops in Massachusetts with Updated Pandemic Guidance

Dear people of the Dioceses of Massachusetts and Western Massachusetts,

Our first word to you is one of deep gratitude. In the past eight months our churches have responded to the challenges of this pandemic with commitment and creativity. You have found new ways to worship, continued to provide life-sustaining ministry in your communities, and remained in supportive fellowship with one another. Despite widely shared anxiety and fatigue, you have nonetheless remained faithful to the core identity of the church. We are grateful beyond measure. God bless you.

Our second word to you is one of grave concern and utmost caution. Over the past several weeks, the spread of the coronavirus has increased dramatically in the Commonwealth. Infection levels have returned to levels not seen since spring. On November 2, Governor Baker issued revised [measures](#), imposing stricter controls on gatherings in both private and public settings. As we move into colder weather and flu season, we believe that clear and present risks in our communities demand a similar response from people of faith to help protect ourselves and one another. Jesus's Law of Love simply must be our foremost and abiding concern.

While religious and political organizations are exempt from many state guidelines, such exemptions place concern for First Amendment legal challenges ahead of concern for the health and well-being of God's people. As your bishops, we are convinced that **Jesus's commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself"** (Matthew 22:39) **must be the overriding factor in our decisions**, even when this requires accepting limits to our own freedoms. Indeed, St. Paul insisted upon this priority. "All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other." (I Corinthians 10:23-24) For this reason, where state standards for places of worship are more permissive than those for other gathering places, we expect our churches to adhere to the more limited standards provided for other public venues.

One of our **consulting medical professionals** has observed poignantly, “The infectious disease epidemiologist in me wants everyone to just stay home. The harm reductionist in me wants to meet people where they are and make them as safe as they can be. The Christian in me sees suffering from these practices and wants to comfort them. I don't know how to be all three at the same time.” As your bishops, we share that tension, desiring to care for the health of all our people and our neighbors, even while providing the spiritual and pastoral care which nurtures and sustains us. We know that our clergy, lay leaders, and all faithful Episcopalians share these same concerns.

The guidelines below represent our hope that renewed restrictions, while causing short-term disappointment, will help us all traverse the coming months in greater health and with genuine care for one another, as Jesus has commanded.

We know and grieve that the timing of these restrictions means that Advent and Christmas simply will not be observed with many of our cherished traditions this year. Instead it will be a year for small, quiet, contemplative possibilities – perhaps not unlike the lonely stable in Bethlehem shared by that little family at the Incarnation, where Christ first came to meet all our hopes and fears.

Yours in Christ,

The Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher, Bishop Diocesan, Diocese of Western Massachusetts
The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates, Bishop Diocesan, Diocese of Massachusetts
The Rt. Rev. Gayle E. Harris, Bishop Suffragan, Diocese of Massachusetts

WORSHIP GUIDELINES:

- **All churches are now urged in the strongest possible terms to suspend in-person, indoor worship.** This expectation is in effect for the foreseeable future, as steps continue to be taken across the country to curtail the dramatic rise of coronavirus infections.
- **Outdoor services are limited to a maximum of 50 persons**, while maintaining appropriate physical distancing and other safety practices. This accords with the state guidelines for outdoor gatherings.
- In any congregation where in-person, indoor worship will continue despite our strong counsel, maximum attendance is determined by the physical-distancing protocols applied within the church's particular worship space (see [*A Journey By Stages*](#)), and in any case **is limited to a maximum of 25 persons**. This limitation is in accordance with state guidelines for indoor venues. All persons in higher-risk groups should participate in worship virtually.

- All worship must **continue to follow the safety protocols** outlined in [*A Journey By Stages*](#) and [*Expanded Guidelines for Stage Two*](#), such as physical distancing, mask wearing, and cleaning and disinfecting.
- Due to the dramatic risk of airborne viral transmission, **cantors or soloists** must observe 20-foot physical distancing, whether for live-streamed or in-person services, indoors or outdoors. The use of pre-recorded or remotely performed music is encouraged. **Congregational singing is prohibited** both indoors and outdoors.
- The sacrament of **Holy Communion** may be made available to the people, as indicated in prior guidelines, through the distribution of previously-consecrated wafers in advance of live-streamed or recorded services. Such distribution should be made by clergy, lay eucharistic visitors, or pastoral caregivers via brief pastoral visits to the home, or during specified hours at the church. Any such method must abide by the protocols for safe distribution of the Sacrament as described in *Expanded Guidelines for Stage Two*.

CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER:

- We commend the efforts of congregations which have **opened their churches for times of private prayer** and reflection while following practices to do so safely.
- We applaud such **pastoral tools** as ‘buddy systems’ and virtual small groups which connect individuals and households with one another. We encourage all people to respond to the isolation felt by so many by reaching out with phone calls, notes, virtual check-ins, and – where safely possible – brief pastoral visits.
- We encourage those who are in lower-risk groups to support those in greater danger of COVID-19 infection by assisting with grocery shopping and other errands, thus helping them remain safer at home.