

Guidelines for Gathering in Churches in Arkansas

Effective September 21, 2020

As we continue to live with the pandemic in our communities and learn more about the virus's transmission, I am updating my recommendations for gathering in church. The meeting recommendations are based on the scientific data that indicate even more clearly that the spread of Covid-19 is primarily respiratory driven and seems to have a correlation with the size of the group, the length of time the group is gathered, the use of face coverings and social distancing of at least six feet, whether or not the group is indoors or outdoors, and the willingness of people with symptoms not to participate in person.

Should you gather? *Recommendations.*

- The decision to gather, either for worship or other purposes, should be made with an awareness of how prevalent the virus is in local towns and counties. To that end, the diocesan office each week will publish a seven-day rolling average of the number of current active Covid cases per 10,000 residents in each county, as reported by the state. Your county having more or less than fourteen active cases per 10,000 residents seems to be a reasonable guide to determine the acceptability of risk, but you and your congregation's leadership need to decide if the risk is acceptable in your context.
- Issues to consider in determining whether or not to meet in-person:
 - Outdoor gatherings are much safer than indoor gatherings.
 - Meeting in larger spaces is better than smaller spaces.
 - Well-ventilated spaces are better than spaces with less ventilation.
 - Shorter gatherings are safer than longer gatherings.
 - Smaller groups are safer than larger groups.
 - The names of attendees at any gathering are helpful if future contact tracing is needed.

Practices you are required to take to stop viral spread at any gathering:

- Household groups are to stay at least six feet from other household groups.
- All people have a face covering. The exception is that speakers might consider removing a face covering when speaking if they are at least twelve feet away from others.
- Hand sanitizer and sanitizing spray are available in the church (or other gathering space) and bathrooms.
- Potential attendees are reminded that no one with symptoms should attend an in-person gathering.
- Objects such as offering plates and orders of service are not shared or passed among attendees.

Required liturgical actions:

- Avoid congregational singing or a choir of more than four people.
- Do not use commercial, individual bread and wine packets.
- If the Holy Eucharist is celebrated, only the Celebrant consumes consecrated Wine.
- Keep the bread to be distributed covered during the Eucharistic canon (perhaps by a purificator) so that the celebrant is not spreading aerosol droplets on the bread while speaking.
- Consecrated Bread may be distributed to parishioners, provided both the Eucharistic Minister and the person receiving Communion are masked, and the people receiving Communion remain at a distance of at least six feet from one another.
- Eucharistic ministers need to sanitize their hands immediately before distributing consecrated Bread.
- Consecrated Bread that has been in a vessel used for distributing Communion will not be reserved for future use.
- At baptisms, the officiating priest should not hold an infant in the priest's arms.

Helpful liturgical actions:

- Consider having an usher provide hand sanitizer to people as they enter the church *and* as each person prepares to receive Communion.
- Having a posted sign with a QR code from which people can access an online order of service on cellphones is helpful if your congregation has that capability.

Serving food:

As of September 9, 2020, the Arkansas Department of Health allowed self-service salad bars and buffets. Even though our churches are not commercial restaurants, any congregation that wishes to serve food needs to understand this directive and follow as closely as possible the procedures that can be applied in a congregational setting. The directive includes the following:

- Users must remain at least six feet from each other.
- Any user (server or participant) getting food or using the serving utensil must have used hand sanitizer and be wearing a food service glove.
- Serving utensils must be replaced every time a food item is replaced on the buffet or serving line. Serving utensils may not be used for more than sixty minutes.
- Users will use a clean plate for each trip to the buffet.