

Diocese of Alaska Public Worship and Congregation COVID-19 Mitigation Plans

“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” 1 Cor 8:9

The requirements listed in this document are based on CDC recommendations; Alaska Public Health Mandates; and best practices discussed across the Episcopal Church and with our Ecumenical Partners. The requirements in this plan that are marked with an asterisk () are based on AK State Public Health Mandates. However, the requirements in this outline are specific to congregations in the Diocese of Alaska and have been established by the Bishop. These requirements are mandatory even if there is no applicable State Public Health Mandate or if a State Mandate suggests a specific action or exposure mitigation protocol is “optional.” Congregations may add further restrictions to individual Mitigation Plans provided all listed here is included.*

1. *Establish a COVID-19 Mitigation Plan addressing the practices and protocols to protect all participants in the liturgy including congregants, worship leaders, and clergy. ***COVID-19 Mitigation Plans must be submitted to the Bishop for approval before in-person public worship may occur in Episcopal Church buildings.***

All COVID-19 Mitigation Plans must include and/or provide for:

2. Where applicable, congregations must consult with and have the support of their elders, chiefs, and tribal and village authorities before submitting a COVID-19 Mitigation Plan to the bishop for approval.
3. *Once approval has been given, signage must be posted conspicuously at the entry to the building notifying the public of the parish/congregation’s COVID-19 Mitigation Plan and stating clearly that any person with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 may not enter the premises.
4. *No gathering larger than 20 people is allowed, which includes the minimum number of necessary personnel or volunteers to facilitate the service, or 25 percent maximum occupancy as required by law (whichever is smaller). Outdoor gatherings of no more than 50 is permitted with strict adherence to 6-foot social distancing between non-household members. Outdoor singing is allowed with 10-foot social distancing between non-household members. ***The 20 person indoor limit is to be maintained at this phase despite amendments to the limits set by State Public Health Mandate.***
5. *Six-foot distancing must be maintained between non-household members throughout the worship service and at every part of the liturgy. This includes worship leaders. However, when speaking or singing, worship leaders must remain 10 feet from any other person. *Household members do not need to maintain 6-foot distancing.* It strongly recommended that a tape measure or 6-foot reference object be used to layout and/or mark true six-foot distancing in your worship space. DO NOT assume you recognize six feet by eye.
6. *Cloth face coverings must be worn by all attending the service unless for medical or physical reasons a face covering cannot be worn. Celebrants, Readers, Officiants, and other worship leaders may remove face coverings to speak; however, when doing so, they must remain 10 feet from any other person.
7. Given the 20-person limit on gatherings, a plan must be described for how the parish/congregation will accommodate the potential interest of more than 20 individuals attending worship.

8. *Where possible, persons must enter and exit through different entries using one-way traffic. Where only one entry is available, a plan must be described for assuring single file, 6 foot spacing for everyone entering and exiting the church.
9. *The parish/congregation must provide handwashing capability or hand sanitizer and encourage all participants to sanitize hands immediately upon arrival and, as much as possible, before touching any surfaces, books, or furnishings.
10. *Plan must establish protocols for sacrament, communion, or collecting offering with minimal handling of the offering plate and money and proper sanitization of hands and disinfecting of surfaces. If Holy Communion is to be celebrated, the Bishop must approve any plan for administration. *See “Restrictions on the Administration of Holy Communion”*
11. Plan must provide tissues and lined waste baskets sufficient to maintain social distancing, and must include a schedule and protocol for changing of liners.
12. *Plan must describe a protocol for no physical contact exchanges for the Peace or any other greetings. *Household members may greet one another with appropriate physical expressions.*
13. *Parish/Congregation must provide “touch-point” sanitization (e.g., doorknobs, pew or chair backs) throughout the facility every hour during any gathering, including all liturgies. A plan must describe how this will be accomplished (this may include limiting liturgies to less than an hour).
14. *The Plan must include protocols for “touch-point” sanitization between all gatherings.
15. Due to the extraordinary challenges of maintaining distancing, face covering, and sanitation protocols with non-household children, physical gatherings for Sunday School, Godly Play, or any other Children’s Programs are suspended at this phase.
16. *Public Health Mandates for All Social Gatherings prohibit serving food or drink. Given this Mandate and the extraordinary challenges of maintain social distancing, face covering, and sanitization protocols in an unstructured setting, Coffee Hour, Fellowship Hour, or any other unstructured after worship gatherings are suspended at this phase.
17. Church Choirs and singing have been a source of “superspreading” of COVID-19. Research shows evidence that the aerosolizing of respiratory moisture from singing can be projected far beyond 6 feet AND linger for up to 20 minutes. Because congregational singing indoors represents a high risk of transmission, it should be avoided; therefore, indoor public singing should be suspended during this phase. *A Public Health Mandate requires 10-foot social distancing when singing **outdoors**.
18. All Mitigation protocols apply to every gathering or activity within the church building whether for worship, as a ministry activity, or a gathering of a group not directly affiliated with the church (e.g. AA, Scouts, etc.). Each congregation will have to work with outside groups to assure sanitizing requirements are met. As always, a congregation reserves the right to limit meetings in the parish buildings.
19. All Mitigation Plans must meet the requirements of State and local Public Health Mandates in addition to Diocesan Mandates. If Public Health Mandates or Orders change and specify stricter measures, Mitigation Plans must be amended to meet the stricter measures.
20. Although an approved Mitigation Plan may make it possible to begin limited public worship in Episcopal Church buildings, it is NOT a requirement. It is Bishop Lattime’s opinion that congregations hold off on initiating restricted forms of public worship, and to include as many “stake-holders” as possible in these decisions. It is one thing for individuals to take informed risks for themselves, it is another to contribute to the opportunities for risk.

Restrictions on the Administration of Holy Communion

1. No priest may celebrate Holy Communion alone. It is certain that the Episcopal Church will be engaged in conversations about the meaning of “gathering” and “presence” in the context of online worship as a result of the experiences and experiments of this pandemic. It is for the whole Church to make these determinations. Until the Church has reached consensus on these matters, we will remain faithful to the understanding of “gathering at the Lord’s Table” to include those who are physically present.
2. The Celebrant will visibly and thoroughly wash her or his hands with approved hand sanitizer before setting the table, and again before commencing the Eucharistic Prayer.
3. The bread and cup of wine to be consecrated must remain covered throughout the Eucharistic Prayer. (projecting your voice over the bread and wine presents similar aerosolized disease transmission exposure as singing). If bread is to be distributed, wafers must be used and placed in a closed ciborium/container throughout the Eucharistic Prayer. Therefore, on the altar would be the Cup, the Bread to be broken, and the wafers to be distributed contained in a closed ciborium/container.
4. All measures to avoid the handling of the bread and cup must be taken. At the words of Institution the priest will lay a hand on the covered bread and covered cup.
5. The Bread used for the Fraction will not be distributed.
6. Intinction (dipping the Bread in the Cup or wine—receiving both kinds simultaneously) in *any* form is ***not approved*** by the Bishop.
7. Communion in one kind, the Bread alone, may be offered.
8. As each worship space is unique, a plan must be in place and described that maintains 6-foot social distancing throughout the act of receiving Holy Communion by communicants. This includes while coming forward, waiting, receiving, and returning to one’s seat or pew. It is strongly recommended that a tape measure or 6-foot reference device be used to layout worship space. ***See exception for Communicant and Minister at Distribution of Bread in Item 10 below***
9. All clergy administering the Bread must visibly and thoroughly wash her or his hands with approved hand sanitizer before serving Holy Communion. Clergy will set an example and wear masks while distributing Holy Communion.
10. Distribution of the Communion Bread must be done in a way that avoids physical contact even if maintaining 6-foot distancing is not practicable. Clergy will provide direction and guidance on how Communion will be received at the time of distribution.
11. Communicants must keep the required face covering until the Bread has been received. They may remove the mask to consume the Bread, then immediately replace the mask to return to their seat.
12. Communicants should use hand sanitizer immediately before and after receiving the Communion.

No mitigation plan can remove all risk, and those who are in the high-risk population remain vulnerable even with the most carefully planned and executed COVID-19 mitigation protocols. Individuals with compromised immunity, pre-existing health conditions that place them at higher risk to COVID-19, or who are 65 years of age or older, are encouraged to consult their personal physician when weighing the risks of participating in limited social gatherings and public worship.

Worship and Holy Communion are acts of the whole people of God. While it may be that individuals are willing to take personal risks to gain the personal benefits of Holy Communion and the blessing of fellowship with friends who they have missed seeing, some may even believe that it is their “right” to do so. However, as a Christian Community we are always called to discern the health and needs of the whole body of Christ above our personal benefit or the exercise of our individual “rights.”

It is one thing to be willing to take risks, it is a completely different thing to contribute to risky behavior.

We are called to follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who gave his life for the life of the whole world. Let us “[have] the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

For Reflection on Returning to Public Worship

As you consider returning to Public Worship and prepare your COVID-19 Mitigation Plan, I ask that you read and meditate on Philippians 2:1-8:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!