

Steps on the Journey to Gathering Anew

A COVID-19 Response Plan for Central New York Episcopalians

Recent Updates

This plan will be regularly updated as new medical and policy information informs decisions. The last update was **June 16, 2020**:

- *Expansion of allowances for in-person gatherings in Step 2 including:*
 - *Communion permitted (bread only) with safety protocols around distribution;*
 - *Baptisms permitted;*
 - *Outdoor gatherings of up to 25 individuals permitted;*
 - *Modified version of Covenant for Gathering Anew available to congregations wishing to offer outdoor gatherings only.*
- *Requirement to complete the New York State Business Affirmation and creation of a Safety Plan prior to returning to use of church buildings in Step 2.*

Overview

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, God is calling Central New York Episcopalians to live into our shared vision of a **world healed by love**. The following plan outlines how we will care for our communities and one another through our faithful response to the pandemic.

The goals of Episcopalians in Central New York include:

- Sharing God's love and hope with our communities in this uncertain time.
- Keeping Jesus' command to "remember the least of these"—the most vulnerable members of our community--by limiting physical contact and initiating practices to slow the spread of infectious disease.
- Continuing to provide people with the very best pastoral care now and in the months to come.
- Continuing prayer, worship, and formation, whether gathered in-person or online.
- Continuing community outreach ministry where this is safe and feasible.

What the way forward looks like:

- **Careful and cautious:** The population of the Episcopal Church in Central New York has a higher median age than the general population of Central New York and therefore a higher proportion of people who are especially vulnerable to Covid-19. Therefore, the churches of the Diocese of CNY will return to in-person gatherings and re-open our buildings for use more slowly and cautiously than required by the government.
- **Inclusive:** Throughout the “gathering anew” process, to ensure the safety and inclusion of people who may not be able to return to in-person worship and gatherings, we strongly encourage the continuation of online worship and pastoral care.
- **One step at a time:** We will return to in-person worship and gatherings in a series of steps. These steps may vary in length and our movement through these steps may not be linear. We will be prepared to move to an earlier step if circumstances change. There will be times where the way forward is not clear, and we will trust in God’s constant presence.
- **Transformative:** We do not expect a “return to normal,” but rather that God is already doing a new thing in the midst of this crisis. As we learn to love God, one another, and all creation in these changing circumstances, our churches will be transformed.

Steps

- [Step 1](#): Stay at home
- [Step 2](#): Early re-gathering
- [Future steps](#)
- [Appendix A](#): Covenants for Gathering Anew
- [Appendix B](#): Questions for the Vestry
- [Appendix C](#): Resources

Step 1: Stay at home

Worship, formation, and connection

- In-person gatherings for worship and formation are suspended.
- Online worship and formation is strongly encouraged (including Sunday services, the Daily Office, bible studies, children’s programming, and small group formation and fellowship). Holy Eucharist is not to be celebrated.
- The safest way to record or live stream worship services is to do so from home. Church staff are permitted to gather in churches for the purpose of recording or live streaming

services, provided that masks are worn, physical distance is maintained, and appropriate hygiene is followed.

- Vestries should continue to meet by phone or online conference.

Pastoral offices

- In-person pastoral visits are prohibited, with the exception of the administration of last rites.
- Small graveside funeral services for family only are permitted, provided that masks are worn, physical distance is maintained, and appropriate hygiene is followed.
- Baptisms are permitted only in the case of a pastoral emergency, with parents and godparents only, provided that masks are worn, physical distance is maintained, and appropriate hygiene is followed.
- Weddings are permitted only in the case of a pastoral emergency, with spouses and witnesses only, provided that masks are worn, physical distance is maintained, and appropriate hygiene is followed.

Community Outreach Ministries

- Twelve-step ministries should be moved to remote alternatives wherever possible. Should your church continue to host in-person twelve-step groups, please direct them to wear masks, maintain physical distance, and follow appropriate hygiene practices. All surfaces should be disinfected before and after meetings.
- Food pantries and community meal programs are encouraged to continue operations wherever possible, maintaining appropriate safeguards as directed by state and local governments. In most cases, moving to a “to-go” distribution model will be appropriate.

Building and Office Use Guidelines

- Parish and diocesan staff should work from home, as appropriate for their duties.
- Presence in buildings must be minimal and drop-in to maintain essential operations (deposits, mail processing, etc.). Staff and volunteers must communicate to ensure that there is only one person in the building at a time and common surfaces, including counter tops, door knobs, and office electronics should be disinfected before and after use.

Step 2: Early re-gathering

In this step, small, limited in-person gatherings, including Eucharist conveyed in Bread only with safety precautions, are permitted within the guidelines outlined below. Prevention of the spread of infectious disease continues to be a priority.

Until a vaccine or cure is developed, there will be a risk associated with in-person gatherings, no matter the precautions taken.

Many Episcopal congregations have a higher proportion of individuals who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. Entry into Step 2 may not be appropriate for every congregation.

Criteria for Step 2:

Clergy and vestries of individual congregations must submit the [Covenant for Gathering Anew \(see Appendix A\)](#) to the bishop's office to request permission for in-person gatherings. There are two versions of the Covenant available:

1. Covenant for Gathering Anew: Outdoor Gatherings Only
2. Covenant for Gathering Anew: Building Use

Covenants must be approved in writing by the bishop or her designee prior to in-person gatherings of any kind. Note that church buildings may not be opened to the congregation or the public unless the "Covenant for Gathering Anew: Building Use" is completed and approved by the bishop or her designee.

Congregations with approved Covenants may commence in-person gatherings on or after July 5, 2020.

Preparing the church building and the congregation for re-entry

- Before any re-entry, congregations must deep clean the entire church building, including pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, stair railings, and microphones. Please see [Appendix C](#) for current cleaning guidelines from the CDC and New York State.
- Consider removing all non-essential items from rooms so that there are fewer surfaces to touch.
- Consider posting signs and making announcements about non-contact greetings and reminders to refrain from physical contact, including shaking hands and hugging (see [Appendix C](#) for printable resources).

- Communicate with your congregation before they arrive about the preparations you have done for their re-entry and to reiterate that, if they are sick or are of a vulnerable population, they should stay home and join online, if available through your congregation or another.

Requirements for in-person worship and other gatherings:

Size of Groups:

- **Gatherings indoors:** The number present for worship and other gatherings will be limited to the number of individuals who can be seated in the sanctuary or meeting room at least six feet apart (in all directions) **to a maximum of 15 individuals**.
- **Gatherings outdoors:** The number present for worship and other gatherings will be limited **to a maximum of 25 individuals**. At least six feet of distance (in all directions) will be maintained between household groups at all times.

Physical Distancing:

- At least six feet of distance (in all directions) will be maintained between household groups at all times.
- In worship spaces, cordoning off of alternate pews and marking pews with one-foot marks may assist in maintaining this distance.
- Ushers shall be trained to assist individuals in maintaining six feet of distance at entry/exit points.
- Physical contact, including hugs or handshakes, is prohibited.
- To comply with distancing requirements, nursery and childcare will not be provided for in-person gatherings.
- Where possible, continue to offer online worship and formation opportunities for individuals who will not join in-person gatherings.
- Advance sign-up (with space for visitors who may drop in) may be helpful to ensure compliance with limits on size of worship gatherings.

Masks and hygiene:

- All individuals, including clergy, must wear masks covering the nose and mouth at all times during in-person gatherings and when in the church building or on church property.
- All individuals must observe hand-washing and must use hand sanitizer when entering and leaving the worship space.
- Where possible, keep doors open to minimize contact with door handles.
- Door handles, pews, and other common surfaces will be disinfected before and after each gathering.

Liturgy:

- Because physical contact and proximity are prohibited, all individuals should remain in place for the passing of the peace. Parish leaders can model safe greetings from their places including bows and waves.

- The Eucharist may be celebrated and Communion may be distributed in one kind only, the Bread.
 - The celebrant will use hand sanitizer immediately before and after celebrating the Eucharist and immediately before and after distributing the Bread to the congregation.
 - The celebrant will maintain physical distance from parishioners to the extent possible during the distribution of Communion. We recommend considerations to reduce physical contact during the distribution of Communion including use of tongs or disposable cups or plates.
 - Communicants will keep masks on when receiving Communion. Each communicant should return to their seat/place before removing their mask briefly to consume the Host.
 - Communicants will use hand sanitizer immediately before and after receiving Communion.
- Singing is prohibited.
- No offering plate may be passed. Gifts may be collected online or in containers placed at entry points.
- Printed materials should be eliminated where possible or distributed in a manner that minimizes contact, for instance, by having a welcome table upon which bulletins are presented. Participants should take worship materials home for recycling rather than materials being re-used.
- Consider removing prayer books, hymnals, and other materials from the pews.
- Consider offering digital worship materials that can be viewed on personal devices.

Coffee hours and fellowship:

- In-person gatherings following worship services are prohibited.
- Online coffee hours are encouraged.

Outdoor services:

- Outdoor worship services and gatherings are strongly encouraged over indoor worship services and gatherings. All diocesan guidelines, including hygiene, wearing masks over the nose and mouth, and physical distancing, apply to outdoor services and gatherings.

Pastoral offices

- In-person pastoral visits are permitted, but online or phone visits are still preferred. All individuals will wear masks, follow appropriate hygiene, and maintain at least six feet of distance. Outdoor meetings are encouraged.
- In-person funerals, baptisms, and weddings are permitted, following the requirements of other in-person worship services outlined above and minimizing physical contact.

Community Outreach Ministries

- Twelve-step ministries may continue to meet in churches, following the same requirements as in-person gatherings for worship.
- Food pantries and community meal programs are encouraged to continue operations wherever possible, maintaining appropriate safeguards as directed by state and local governments. In most cases, continuing a “to-go” distribution model will be appropriate.

Building and Office Use Guidelines

Covenant for Gathering Anew, New York State Business Affirmation and Safety Plan:

- Prior to returning to use of the parish building or parish office, in addition to completing the diocesan [Covenant for Gathering Anew: Building Use \(see Appendix A\)](#), clergy and vestries will:
 - Review the [New York State Interim Guidance for Religious & Funeral Services During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency](#)
 - Complete the Business Affirmation at <https://forms.ny.gov/s3/ny-forward-affirmation>
 - Complete and conspicuously post on the church premises a Safety Plan (view the [NY Forward Safety Plan Template](#))

In the parish office:

- We encourage clergy and vestries to make allowances for staff to work from home wherever possible, as appropriate for their duties.
- Parish offices may open following all state guidelines, including:
 - Wear masks covering the nose and mouth at all times;
 - Maintain six feet of physical distance between individuals;
 - Wash and sanitize hands regularly;
 - Regularly disinfect common surfaces such as countertops, door knobs, and office electronics.

General building use:

- All individuals must follow all physical distancing and hygiene guidelines including wearing masks covering the nose and mouth at all times. Consider having a supply of masks for those who arrive at your building without one.
- Buildings must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.

- Consider posting signs outlining COVID-19 symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they experience symptoms or feel unsafe (see [Appendix C](#) for printable resources).
- Maintain an appropriate stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer, and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
- Consider allowing building users/rental groups back in (music lessons, etc.) on the condition that they are able to observe all diocesan guidelines, including distancing requirements and hygiene protocols.
- Create an emergency plan in case a person who has used your building is diagnosed with COVID-19. Consider how you might respond in care, in communication, and in cleanliness.
- Consider maintaining a visitor log (including phone numbers and email addresses) for all who enter the building in the event that they may have come in contact with someone with the disease and reporting is required. To the extent possible, the log should be managed by a greeter or an office staff-person or volunteer or follow some other no-touch method.

Future Steps

As infection and hospitalization rates decline, and testing becomes more available, and when vaccination becomes possible, the Episcopal Diocese of Central New York will issue new guidelines appropriate to the developing situation. Our primary concern will continue to be the safety of the most vulnerable members of our communities.

Appendix A: Covenants for Gathering Anew

Clergy and vestries of individual congregations must submit the Covenant for Gathering Anew (see Appendix A) to the bishop's office to request permission for in-person gatherings. There are two versions of the Covenant available:

1. [Covenant for Gathering Anew: Outdoor Gatherings Only](#)
2. [Covenant for Gathering Anew: Building Use](#)

(Note: Once you have opened the covenant, use the File Menu and navigate to "Download As..." to download a copy to your device.)

Appendix B: Questions for the Vestry

We offer this list of questions for your vestry to consider in consultation with clergy and parish staff. Some of these questions are included in the [Covenants for Gathering Anew](#). We recommend your vestry work through these questions before requesting permission to re-open for in-person gathering in Step 2.

- How will you maintain connection with those who cannot gather in-person, even when restrictions are lifted?
- How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping with household groups sitting six feet apart?
- How will you continue to be invitational and open to people that are not yet part of your community?
- How will you ensure regular required sanitation and disinfection for your communal spaces?
- How might your building use agreements need to be updated to reflect the new realities revealed by the pandemic?
- How will you continue to encourage and invite stewardship, especially as some members of the congregation continue to stay at home?
- What assets do you have (space, yard, volunteers) that might be used to respond in service to your community in light of the pandemic?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual, while remembering privacy and pastoral care?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you conduct an intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
- How will you communicate diocesan guidelines and your parish's safety plan to the congregation?

Appendix C: Resources

[Centers for Disease Control & Prevention](#) - vast resource for COVID-19 precautions and suggestions

[CDC's Interim Guidance for Houses of Worship](#) - a set of best practices for religious institutions

[New York State Coronavirus Information Hub](#)

[New York State Interim Guidance for Religious & Funeral Services During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency](#)

Cleaning guidelines:

- [Cleaning your Facility](#) - CDC guide for building cleaning
- [Sanitizing Office Spaces](#) - CDC guide for frequently used spaces
- [New York State Department of Health Interim Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection of Public and Private Facilities for COVID-19](#)

Posters and print resources:

- [Print resources and posters](#) - CDC printables to share information about COVID-19
- [NYS "Protect Yourself & Stop the Spread" poster](#)

[Diocesan Coronavirus Resource Hub](#)