

The background is a dark, semi-transparent stained glass window. It features a central figure of a woman in a white and blue robe, standing and reading an open book. To her left is a tall, thin cypress-like tree, and to her right is a large, leafy tree. The bottom of the window shows a landscape with a path and a vase of flowers. The overall color palette is muted, with blues, greens, and earthy tones.

Reopening Guidelines

VERSION 1

JUNE 16, 2020

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESES OF
**Western New York &
Northwestern Pennsylvania**

Letter from Bishop Sean

Dear People of God in Western New York and Northwestern Pennsylvania:

In mid-March, when we suspended in-person worship, none of us could have imagined the ways the world was about to change or what would be required of us in response. Throughout these long months, you have been resilient, flexible and collaborative as we have gathered for online worship, raised more than \$21,000 to feed first responders and people in need, rallied to stand against racial injustice, and begun to discern the mission to which our church might be called in a post-pandemic world.

The pandemic will not be over for some time, but places of business and other public gathering places have begun to reopen in both Pennsylvania and New York. The public health standards in both states now permit, in most places, small in-person gatherings for worship. In response, we have developed, in consultation with the clergy of the diocese and the mission strategy advisory group, these guidelines for reopening church buildings. We are grateful to the Dioceses of Indianapolis and Chicago for sharing their plans, which have informed our thinking and helped shape our response.

As you will read in this document, although returning to in-person worship is permissible beginning July 5, I do not recommend that most congregations do so. Reopening our buildings for worship can present a significant risk, particularly to clergy and laypeople aged 65 and older and to those with underlying health conditions. It will require extensive work and possible expense to comply with the cleaning and disinfecting protocols outlined in this document. You have my full support if you judge that continuing to worship online is the best choice for your congregation, and I will continue to host Sunday online worship with leaders from across the diocese for the foreseeable future.

My caution about reopening does not equate to a desire to remain still. I hope that we can devote the weeks to come to more of the collaboration already beginning to flourish across our partnership. How might lay and clergy leaders use this time to work more closely with one another? Might it make sense for congregations to partner with one another as we plan for in-person worship in new ways? How might we support one another as we experiment for the sake of the gospel in a time like no other?

Whether your congregation chooses to reopen or decides to continue gathering online, my staff and I are available to support you as you review the recommendations and requirements in this document, and consider how you might collaborate with colleagues and diocesan neighbors to continue serving the people of God. Thank you, as always, for your faithfulness to God's mission in our region.

Faithfully,



Assembling for In-Person Public Worship: Permissible, but not recommended, beginning July 5

Although returning to in-person worship is permissible beginning July 5 under the guidelines and requirements outlined in this document, at this time, Bishop Sean does not recommend that most congregations return to in-person worship. Reopening our buildings for worship can present a significant risk, particularly to clergy and laypeople aged 65 and older and with underlying health conditions, and requires extensive work and potential expense to comply with adequate cleaning and disinfecting protocols. You have the bishop's full support if you judge that continuing to worship online is the best choice for your congregation. Bishop Sean will continue to host Sunday online worship with leaders from across the diocese for the foreseeable future.

Congregations that are prepared to reopen their buildings must do so in accordance with both state regulations and the requirements of this document. Each congregation must convene clergy and lay leaders to develop a reopening plan using the questions, recommendations, and requirements outlined below. Please submit the checklist found at the end of this plan to [Vanessa Butler](#), canon for administration, before you plan to reopen your building.

- Congregational leaders must assign someone who will be responsible for monitoring the federal and state public health standards that are applicable for your county.
- If conditions necessitate returning to worship from home after in-person worship has begun, please inform [Vanessa Butler](#).

At this time, we do not have a projected date for granting approval for gatherings larger than those currently approved in the state regulations outlined above, but Bishop Sean will notify you when those conditions change.

Public Health Standards

In New York, groups of up to 25 may gather for worship outside in areas that are in phase three of the state's reopening plan. Groups of up to 25 or one-quarter of your building's occupancy, whichever is smaller, may return to indoor worship beginning on July 5. The [Centers for Disease Control](#) recommends that people aged 65 and older or who have underlying medical conditions that put them at greater risk from the virus stay home, and Bishop Sean endorses that advice. Larger gatherings will not be permitted until the state offers further guidance.

In Pennsylvania, groups of up to 25 may gather for worship outside. Groups of up to 25 or one-quarter of your building's seating capacity, whichever is smaller, may gather for in-person indoor worship beginning on July 5 in counties in the yellow phase of the state's reopening plan. Groups equal to one-quarter of your building's seating capacity may gather in churches in counties in the green phase. The [Centers for Disease Control](#) recommends that people aged 65 and older or who have underlying medical conditions that put them at greater risk from the virus stay home, and Bishop Sean endorses that advice. We will notify you when larger gatherings are permissible.

Building Use

Below are questions, recommendations and requirements for preparing buildings to reopen.

Questions

- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection of your physical plant including pews, doorknobs, light switches, restrooms, and other areas that people touch when they are in your building? [Find the CDC guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting public spaces online.](#)
- How will you ensure safe airflow?
- How will you provide for the distribution and disposal of worship bulletins?
- Do you need to make provisions for small group gathering spaces?
- Do you need to make provisions to disinfect and/or restrict the use of nurseries or playgrounds?
- If you hold multiple services, how will you ensure proper social distancing between those leaving the church and those arriving?
- How will you communicate your safety standards and procedures to people both before they enter the building and while they are present at a service or meeting?
- How will you properly dispose of biohazard waste, including used masks?
- If you wish to provide access to your columbarium during this time, how will you do so while maintaining social distance for visitors?

Recommendations

- Maximize the circulation of fresh air by opening doors and windows, and limit use of fans or other HVAC systems that recirculate air through the building.
- Explore the possibility of limiting or entirely avoiding the distribution of printed worship materials. Consider publishing the worship bulletin online or via email, so that people can print it at home or use it on their mobile devices.
- Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home and seek medical attention if they have symptoms. [Find Centers for Disease Control signs to download and print online.](#)
- Continue to allow staff members who use the church office to work from home as much as possible.
- Consider limiting the number of people who use the church office and discourage visitors. Ensure that high-touch surfaces are regularly sanitized.

Requirements

- You must drain and sanitize all holy water stoops and baptismal fonts.
- You must maintain sufficient amounts of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels.
- You must clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces like light switches, pews, doorknobs, restrooms, etc.
- You must remove prayer books, hymnals and Bibles from the pews.
- Everyone who enters the church must wear a mask at all times. [Read more about how masks help fight the spread of the virus.](#)
- You must have a clearly articulated plan to communicate your safety standards and practices to the congregation.
- You must follow [EPA guidelines to restore building water quality.](#)

Building users besides the congregation, such as recovery groups, must be provided with a copy of this document and agree to adhere to its standards.

Worship and Fellowship

Questions

- If you choose to return to your buildings while those over 65 and those with underlying medical conditions are being advised by the [Centers for Disease Control](#) and the bishop to stay home, how will you provide for them and for others who do not feel safe attending church?
- How will you respond to people in high risk categories who nonetheless want to return to in-person worship?
- If you return to your church, what will you continue to provide online? Worship? Online coffee hour? Online small groups?
- How will you limit attendance at gatherings so there is room for visitors and newcomers to take part without exceeding the maximum number of people allowed in your building by public health standards?
- If you plan to hold outdoor worship, how will you mark on the ground where family groups can stand to maintain social distance? How will you accommodate people who may need to sit during the service?
- How will you coordinate logistics like reservations in order to make that happen?

- Everyone present in church gatherings must wear masks. How will you provide masks for people who forget? How will you attend to someone who doesn't want to wear a mask?
- Will you screen people who attend gatherings? How will you respond if someone appears ill?
- How does your county health department advise churches to make a report if someone attends church and is subsequently diagnosed with COVID-19?
- What degree of exposure to someone with COVID-19 would preclude someone from gathering?
- How will you communicate seating arrangements that ensure social distancing?

Recommendations

- The Centers for Disease Control recommends that people aged 65 and older or who have underlying medical conditions that put them at greater risk from the virus stay home, and Bishop Sean endorses that advice.
- Staff members over age 65 who cannot work from home may return to work if the nature of their work and workspace allows them to practice proper social distancing.
- Outdoor services are preferred over indoor services, assuming all necessary precautions can be taken. Sunlight and increased air circulation have a protective effect.
- Consider using an online event service such as Eventbrite to take reservations for worship to ensure you do not exceed capacity and to gather contact information for attendees in the event it is needed for contact tracing.
- Provide a stationary and central offering basket. Encourage and make provisions for online giving (available through the diocese at no cost to congregations).
- Change altar linens between services when different clergy are to officiate.
- Consider gathering contact information from all worship and meeting attendees. Recording names will enable the Health Department to more quickly trace, test, and quarantine people who may have been exposed to COVID-19 if an attendee is later found to have had the virus at the time they were present. Advance registration for services will ease the process of collecting contact information.

Requirements

- Everyone at church gatherings must wear masks at all times.

- Until the risks of singing as a means of transmission are better understood, cantors, choral and congregational singing are not permitted. Consider how you can use instrumental music (but not wind instruments), recordings and other artistic offerings to God. The Association of Anglican Musicians is one sponsor of a [study on these issues](#), and we will monitor its progress.
- Social distance of 6 feet or more must be observed in seating arrangements. Family groups may sit together.
- Physical contact is not permitted at the peace.
- No offering basket or plate may be passed.
- Greeters must not make physical contact at the entrance of the church by welcoming people with a handshake or a hug.
- In-person coffee hours are prohibited until further notice.
- Delivery of communion to homebound people is prohibited until further notice.

Eucharist

The dioceses strongly recommend that congregations use the rites for Morning Prayer, Ante-Communion or Spiritual Communion rather than offering the Holy Eucharist when we first return to our churches.

If a church feels compelled to hold a Eucharist, priests celebrating should use these guidelines developed by the Diocese of Chicago:

- Bread and wine should be brought to the table by the presider. Presider sets their own table and only presider should be at table.
- Pour only a small amount of wine in chalice to be consumed at end of service when unused hosts are consumed.
- Use hosts instead of homemade bread. Use small presider host.
- Only have presider host directly in front of you during consecration. Have ciborium of hosts for congregants to the side and consider covering the elements being consecrated.
- Think through how you will minimize person-to-person contact for administering the sacrament; how you will sanitize and re-sanitize before and while administering the sacrament; and how you will orchestrate your movements. Please remember that according to The Book of Common Prayer (BCP) rubrics, consecration can be accomplished with a minimum of gestures and touching of elements.
- Create directional signage and instructions for how to receive communion.
- Communicants should receive host while still wearing mask and consume host as they return to their seats.

Baptism

If baptism is necessary during the reopening period, the priest should use these guidelines developed by the Diocese of Chicago:

- The service of Baptism should proceed as normal through the blessing of the water. The presider can bless the water but should not touch the water as the rubrics say.
- In the spirit of the BCP provision for Emergency Baptism (BCP, p. 313), Bishop Sean recommends that parents both administer the water and anoint their child.
- Following the baptism, the presider continues with the welcome of the newly baptized (BCP, p. 308).

Weddings and Funerals

Weddings and funerals can occur while adhering to the guidelines provided in this document. All worship guidelines found in this document pertaining to music, worship bulletins, celebration of the Eucharist, etc. must be observed. [Follow Centers for Disease Control guidance about funerals.](#)

Feeding Ministries

Feeding ministries are to continue following the guidelines from our colleagues in the Diocese of Indianapolis recommended in Bishop Sean's letter of March 12: <https://indydio.org/guidance-for-feeding-ministries-in-light-of-covid-19/>.

Vacation Bible School and Mission Trips

Group activities like vacation bible school, mission trips, and other gatherings are to be held online where possible or postponed. We do not anticipate that these activities will be able to take place in 2020.

Verification of Completion of Plan for Re-entry¹

Vestry/Bishop's Committee has met and agreed to a plan for re-opening, and a timeline for execution.

Preparing/Cleaning/Disinfecting

All common spaces in the worship space have been thoroughly cleaned/or plan is in place before first service.

Plans for ongoing cleaning and sanitizing between services and at end of day are in place. Plans for ongoing cleaning and disinfecting church between services are in place

Adequate time between services for cleaning and disinfecting is planned.

All non-essential items have been removed from all rooms so that there are fewer surfaces to touch.

[EPA regulations regarding building water quality](#) have been followed.

Common Spaces & Furnishings

Prayer books, hymnals, bibles, pens, information cards, etc. have been removed from pews. Plan for distribution of worship bulletins and disposal of bulletins is in place.

Completed review and re-arrangement, if needed, of physical layout of spaces such as narthex, nave, sacristy, vesting areas, etc. to maintain physical distancing and overall safety. Clearly de-lineated markings for how physical distancing is maintained between individuals or family groups.

Bathrooms have signage indicating one-at-a-time usage only. Supplies available in bathrooms for quick disinfecting (disinfectant wipes, hand sanitizer). Signage about personal hygiene. (handwashing, disposing of any trash)

Supplies & Equipment Needed

Hand sanitizer, tissues and waste baskets are accessible and in convenient locations.

Face coverings are available for those who do not have them.

¹Adapted from Diocese of Chicago, "A New Season: Guidelines for Re-Entering Our Church Buildings" May 26, 2020.

Member/Visitor Awareness & Communication

Entry and exiting plans created.

Plan created to assure compliance with maximum number of people allowed.

Signage about physical distancing, entering, exiting, maximum occupancy, hand washing, wearing of facial coverings, non-contact greetings and refraining from shaking hands or hugging is visible and posted.

Congregation is aware of plans for their return and also know to stay home if they are sick or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.

Plan in place if member of congregation or visitor becomes infected with COVID-19.

Plan in place if member or visitor is ill.

Plan in place for someone who refuses to wear a face covering.

Training has been provided to clergy, staff and volunteers (especially greeters, altar guild, readers) in new procedures.

Worship Services

Plans for maintaining remote/online services are in place

If applicable, procedures for celebrating the Eucharist are in place.

Worship bulletins have clear instructions about procedures and guidelines for entering and exiting space, greeting and passing of peace, reception of communion (if applicable), and wearing of face coverings.

Collection boxes are accessible for pledges and donations.

Families celebrating baptisms, weddings and funerals are aware of guidelines and will commit to adhering to them.

We are committed to following and communicating the guidelines we have established.

Congregation

Warden

Rector/Vicar/
Priest-in-Charge

Warden

Date