

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

# Reopening Guidelines

VERSION 2

MARCH 17, 2021

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

## Letter from Bishop Sean

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

Across our region, COVID-19 cases have begun to decline from the precipitous rates we saw this winter. The vaccine rollout, while still slow, has gained some momentum in both New York and Pennsylvania, and it seems as if the worst of the winter weather may be behind us. As a result, I have decided, in consultation with the clergy of our dioceses and the standing committees of the dioceses, to permit congregations to return to limited in-person worship beginning April 1.

As you will read in these updated guidelines, I strongly recommend that only clergy and laypeople who have been fully vaccinated lead in-person worship. Churches whose clergy have not been vaccinated, and who wish to worship in person, may either share services with churches whose clergy have received the vaccine, or invite fully vaccinated retired or non-parochial clergy to lead worship.

Congregations that regather in person must follow state guidelines for indoor and outdoor gatherings, which are linked in this document. Everyone present must wear masks at all times and maintain six feet of distance. Singing, whether by cantors, choirs, or the congregation, is not recommended, and no church employees, lay or ordained, should be expected to return to in-person worship or other work before they have had the opportunity to be vaccinated.

You have my full support if you decide that continuing to worship online is the best choice for your congregation. I will continue to host Sunday online worship with leaders from across the partnership until the Day of Pentecost, May 23. In making your decisions about returning to in-person worship, I commend to you the [Georgia Tech Risk Assessment Planning Tool](#), which shows the risk level of attending an in-person event in any given location.

This year of pandemic has been extraordinarily trying. At many times, it has been difficult for our churches to sustain the resolve to protect the most vulnerable among us. But across our partnership, there has not been a single known case of COVID-19 transmission among staff or church members in congregations that have followed our guidelines. There is no question that your faithful commitment has prevented illness and possibly deaths, and I am extraordinarily grateful to you.

While we are not yet safe from danger, we can reasonably hope that we are now through the worst of this pandemic. President Biden has said that if we continue to wear masks, practice social distance, and get vaccinated, we can hope to return to something like our normal lives early in July. In order to make that hope real, we must continue to be vigilant, especially when we gather in person. Please abide by these new worship guidelines so that we can continue our progress toward a post-pandemic world.

Thank you, as always, for your faithfulness to God's mission in our region.

Faithfully,



## Assembling for In-Person Public Worship: Permissible beginning April 1

While returning to in-person worship is permissible for all congregations beginning April 1 under the guidelines and requirements outlined in this document, Bishop Sean strongly recommends all worship services be led by those who have been fully vaccinated. Staff members and clergy should not be asked to participate in in-person worship services or events until they have had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated. Congregations are asked to abide by indoor and outdoor event guidelines and capacity limits for their state even though houses of worship are not legally required to do so. You have the bishop's full support if you judge that continuing to worship online is the best choice for your congregation. [Georgia Tech's COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool](#) is a helpful tool for making this decision.

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**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 below, but Bishop Sean will notify you when those conditions change.

## Public Health Standards

We can expect frequent updates to state regulations as vaccines continue to be administered and we approach herd immunity.

In New York State, congregations are asked to follow [guidelines for Low-Risk Outdoor and Indoor Arts and Entertainment \(within the Phase Four Industries category\)](#).

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, congregations are asked to follow [guidelines for events within entertainment venues](#). Be sure to watch for [updated state guidelines taking effect April 4](#).

Guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control, including wearing a mask at all times and maintaining six feet of distance, should be followed.

The bishop strongly advises congregations to permit only those who are fully vaccinated to serve as in-person worship leaders. For those who have received the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine, "fully vaccinated" means it has been at least two weeks

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since the second injection. For those who have received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, “fully vaccinated” means it has been at least two weeks since you have received the single injection. For more information, visit [the CDC website](#).

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Congregations are encouraged to work collaboratively so that those who do not have fully vaccinated clergy may partner with congregations who do have fully vaccinated clergy. Congregations may also consider inviting retired fully-vaccinated clergy to lead in-person worship.

## 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.](#)
- Do not ask unvaccinated staff members or clergy to use the church office or attend in-person events until they have had a chance to be fully vaccinated.
- 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.
- Consider removing prayer books, hymnals and Bibles from the pews.

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## Requirements

Holy Week  
Guidance

- Congregations offering in-person worship on Easter Sunday must use an online reservation system such as [SignUpGenius](#) or [Eventbrite](#) in order to ensure you remain within current state capacity limits. There should be a clear plan in place in the event people without reservations have to be turned away. It should be clearly communicated that congregational singing is not recommended.
- Congregations offering in-person worship during Holy Week must forgo high-contact practices such as foot-washing, shared agape meals and kissing of the cross.
- You must drain and sanitize all holy water stoup and baptismal fonts when not in use.
- 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.
- Everyone who enters the church or joins an outdoor service or gathering must wear a mask at all times. [Read more about how masks help fight the spread of virus and best practices for choosing, fitting and caring for masks.](#)
- 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.](#)

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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 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 CDC recommends that people who have been fully vaccinated continue to take precautions by wearing a mask and maintaining distance in public as well as isolating themselves and getting tested if experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.
- Staff members who have not had an opportunity to be vaccinated and 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).

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- 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.
- We recommend congregations make use of pre-recorded music whenever possible and avoid situations in which musicians are in the same place at the same time. Singing, whether by a cantor, a choir or the congregation, is not recommended.
- 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 permitted. Both the person receiving and the person delivering should be fully vaccinated.

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## 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.

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## 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), parents may choose to administer the water and anoint their child. It should be up to the parents to decide how much risk feels appropriate for them and their family.
- Following the baptism, the presider continues with the welcome of the newly baptized (BCP, p. 308).
- The presider should forgo the marking of the forehead with the sign of the cross (with or without chrism).

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## 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.](#)

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## 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, 2020: <https://indydio.org/guidance-for-feeding-ministries-in-light-of-covid-19/>.

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## Formation

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 2021.

Congregations that choose to return to holding Sunday School and youth group programs in person should refer to the [Centers for Disease Control guidance for schools.](#)

## Verification of Completion of Plan for Re-entry<sup>1</sup>

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.

<sup>1</sup>Adapted 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