



Delaware-Maryland Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

ADVICE AND COUNSEL FOR RETURNING TO IN-PERSON GATHERINGS IN THE DELAWARE-MARYLAND SYNOD, ELCA

Office of the Bishop

May 2020

The promise of returning to in-person gatherings brings with it the joyful anticipation of coming back together in beloved church buildings and the sober duty of being prepared to do so safely. Each congregation and ministry bears the responsibility to conduct its ministry in faithfulness to the joy of the Gospel and in care for the safety of its members, community and neighbors. Likewise, each congregation and ministry has a distinct context in which to exercise the Church's mission.

BE ATTENTIVE TO YOUR GOVERNOR'S GUIDELINES

Coordinate your opening with the Governor's guidelines and timing. Even when your jurisdiction permits in-person gatherings for increasing numbers of people, remember that you have both the freedom and responsibility to wait until you are ready to do so safely before offering in-person gatherings in your facilities.

CREATE A THOUGHTFUL PLAN FOR HOW TO OPEN YOUR CONGREGATION.

Plan your work – and then work your plan. Do not gather for in-person gatherings without a plan for doing so safely. Such a plan would be made by a small group of leaders, including the rostered minister(s); that plan would be brought forward to the key leadership for its implementation (think staff, key committees); and approved by the Congregation Council *before* it is implemented. That plan should be specific, include dates and timeline, etc. *Just because a Governor's Executive Order changes does not mean that we should rush right back to the church building, nor does it mean there should be in-person worship gatherings the next Sunday.*

A thoughtful plan will address these important questions with clarity:

How will opening accomplish your primary mission as a congregation?

Take into account the personal safety of your current staff and members who are most at risk as you discern your readiness to open. Be mindful of those who are in the most at-risk populations – including the pastor, deacon and key leadership – and what risks in-person gatherings pose to those who are most likely to be present!

What will your ongoing online presence and work look like?

What are you going to continue to offer exclusively online? What are you going to hybridize for both online and in-person gathering? How do we continue to care for and stand in solidarity with those whose vulnerabilities preclude them from returning to in-person gatherings?

Are there neighboring congregations and ministries you should coordinate with?

Collaboration among congregations (ELCA, Ecumenical and Interfaith partners) and ministries (Social Ministry partners, Outdoor Ministries, Campus Ministries) can build trust in community. How can working together benefit the whole? How can we manage and lower risks by working collaboratively?

Do you have the capacity to clean the building thoroughly according to [Center for Disease Control](#) guidelines between uses?

The virus has been found to remain active for days on various surfaces – including obvious things like door handles, switch-plates, pews; and less obvious surfaces like hymnals, bibles and offering plates. Who is going to be responsible for this, particularly after each in-person gathering? If you were to return to multiple Sunday morning gatherings, or have to add extra Sunday morning gatherings to maintain gathering limits, who will be responsible for the strict cleaning protocols?

How will you facilitate social distancing?

How will you mark off a minimum of 6-foot distances in your building to help people maintain appropriate spacing in transition spaces (narthex, gathering areas, etc.), in meeting spaces and in worship spaces? Will you have hand sanitizer in several locations around the building? How will you communicate expectations not to shake hands or to embrace when sharing the peace? What will be your face mask policy? Will you be providing face masks for those who come without them? Will they be required for attending? Will speakers, singers, the pastor or deacon be required to wear a mask when leading the service? Who will be responsible for enforcing these expectations – and who will have the authority to ask someone non-compliant to leave the facility?

What will music look like as we return to in-person gatherings?

Have choirs and praise teams been apprised of the science of song and transmission? How will you restrict congregation singing as a further precaution? How can musicians reimagine leading the congregation's song? How can we invite the congregation to listen, clap, hum or speak in ways that claim the song as their prayer?

How do we return to celebrating the sacraments?

Would it be wise to hold non-sacramental worship for a time to get used to social distancing and experiencing familiar places in new ways? (The answer is yes!) Are we ready to take strict precautions around baptism so not to create new vectors of transmission? Are we going to keep the font empty – or removed from the congregation – to discourage multiple people touching the water in remembrance of their baptism? If you offer communion, how you will administer the elements safely? How do we manage the risks of transmission through distributing elements? How do we communicate the fullness of receiving communion in one form?

What will you do if more than the maximum permitted number of people show up for an in-person gathering?

Remembering that our services of worship are to be public events and not restricted only to our own members; will you hold more frequent, briefer, smaller gatherings to accommodate more people safely over the course of a week? Do we need to have a system of assigning people to gatherings in order to maintain social distancing and size limit protocols?

What will you do if a member contracts COVID-19?

How will you take attendance each week to aid in tracing who may have been exposed? How will you communicate that to your congregation?

Will you be ready to close again if you need to?

What metrics will determine that need? How will you communicate the need to close again?

Can you take responsibility for your own plan, change it as often as you need to, and refrain from speaking ill of the plans other congregations come up with?

Have you checked with your insurance carrier to see if any of your choices have negative implications for your congregation's liability?

MEET WEEKLY TO EVALUATE YOUR SITUATION

Who will meet weekly to evaluate the in-person and online work of the congregation and ministry? The pastor, deacon and Congregation Council officers seem to be a constitutionally reliable group to do this work, but in some contexts there might be others who should be at the table.

Did this advance your mission? Were your safety practices followed by those who came? Did you encounter unexpected challenges or joys? Do you see a problem that needs to be addressed before next week? How will you update the congregation with any changes to your safety practices based on your evaluation?

RESOURCES FOR MAKING YOUR PLAN

[Delaware's Response to Coronavirus Disease](#)

[Maryland Governor's COVID Response Resources](#)

[Resources for Returning to In-Person Worship](#), ELCA Office of the Presiding Bishop

[Community and Faith-Based Organizations: Plan, Prepare, and Respond](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[The Importance of Risk Assessment](#), p. 8, in *Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19*, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Health Security

[Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[Returning to Church](#), The Wisconsin Council of Churches

[Returning to Public Worship: Theological and Practical Considerations](#), Guidance from the Presbyterian Church (USA)

[A Conversation with Dr. Michael Osterholm](#), Regents Professor, McKnight Presidential Endowed Chair in Public Health, and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis Area Synod Convocation

[COVID-19 and Singing](#), National Association of Teachers of Singing

[Responding to COVID-19](#), American Guild of Organists

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) Pandemic](#), World Health Organization,

[Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19: Guidance for Governors](#), Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health,