



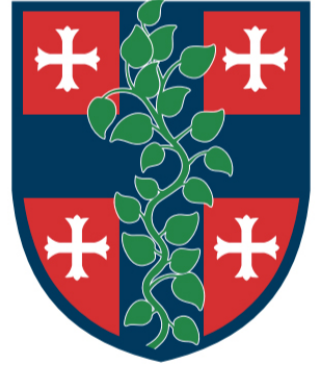
EPISCOPAL
CHURCH OF NH



**Following The Good Shepherd
On The Path Ahead**

June 18, 2020

From Bishop Rob



Dear Clergy and Lay Leaders,

As the state of New Hampshire announces its “Safer at Home Advisory” and continues on the path of re-opening for business, employment, and services, I am sharing this “3.0” document to provide continued guidance regarding how we may go about regathering in our churches.

There is much to be done. With guidance and protocols as currently defined, it is now the work of each congregations’ leadership to discern the way forward for their church. I am allowing some gatherings, but with strict precautions. Gatherings will be permitted as of July 1. That said, we are not required to regather. The Holy Spirit will show the way, given the unique circumstances and physical characteristics of each of our congregations.

While our buildings have been closed, our churches most certainly have been open. I want to express my deep admiration and profound gratitude for the work that has been done by all to keep open to the presence of Christ in each other, in online worship and prayer, remote gatherings, phone trees, and by reaching out and staying “in touch” with those in our congregations most vulnerable, and most susceptible to isolation and loneliness.

As we make decisions about how to be the church and strive to gather once again in our sacred spaces, let us be ever-mindful of our guiding principles, and responsive to the question Presiding Bishop Curry has implored us to ask: “What would love do?”

Yours in the Risen Christ,

The Rt. Rev. A. Robert Hirschfeld
Bishop of New Hampshire

Guiding Principles




In this time of pandemic, guided by love, The Episcopal Church of New Hampshire lives by these foundational principles:

- We will prioritize the well-being of our neighbors, especially those most at risk of contracting this virus, over our desire to gather in our church buildings.
- We will strengthen social connectedness and seek reconciliation with each other and our communities.
- We will continue to be attentive to the physical and social needs of those experiencing hunger, homelessness, isolation, and mental distress.
- We will adhere to the protocols, as currently defined, of Governor Sununu, State epidemiologist Dr. Chan, and other civic and public health authorities as the pandemic evolves and response to the pandemic changes.
- We will continue to do whatever we are called to do to guard against additional waves of infection.

The principles and recommendations in this document are guided by the expertise of medical and civil authorities as well as by the theological foundation of the Way of Love. Specific recommendations and protocols may shift as we learn more and as the pandemic ebbs and flows. We commit to continuing to communicate changes and updates to these recommendations. As you implement these guiding principles, the Bishop and diocesan staff stand ready to partner with you.

New Hampshire Under the “Safer At Home” Advisory

 n June 15, 2020, New Hampshire’s “Stay at Home” order expired. In its place, the Governor announced a “Safer at Home” Advisory. The expiration of the order removes the 10-person limit on social gatherings and ends the distinction between essential and non-essential businesses.

When the federal government and CDC initially issued guidelines and “phases” in combating the coronavirus, there were clearly defined metrics that needed to be met before we were told it would be safe to move forward. These guidelines and benchmarks have not entirely been met in many parts of the US, including New Hampshire. Nevertheless, the Governor has said yes to reopening – but with numerous universal and industry-specific protocols that must be met.

As you work to discern the path forward for your congregation, we encourage you to review the following sources of state data and guidelines:

- [New Hampshire COVID-19 case data and summary dashboard.](#)
- [REVISED New Hampshire places of worship guidance compiled by the NH Council of Churches.](#) This includes pages [60-62 of Executive Order #52, Exhibit B, Section R.](#) – the segment of the Governor’s 100-page document pertaining specifically to Places of Worship.
- General COVID-19 information for the state of New Hampshire can be found at [nh.gov](#).
- Additional case tracking by NHPR can be found [here](#).

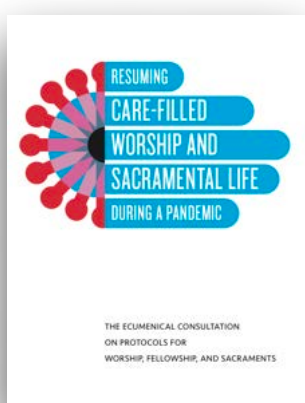
There is a genuine concern and real probability of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases due to the re-opening of restaurants, beaches, and retail establishments,

as well as the impact of out-of-state travelers arriving in New Hampshire for summer vacation. We must remain vigilant in observing the protocols and practices necessary to minimize further surges of the virus.

What Does “Safer At Home” Mean for Our Church?

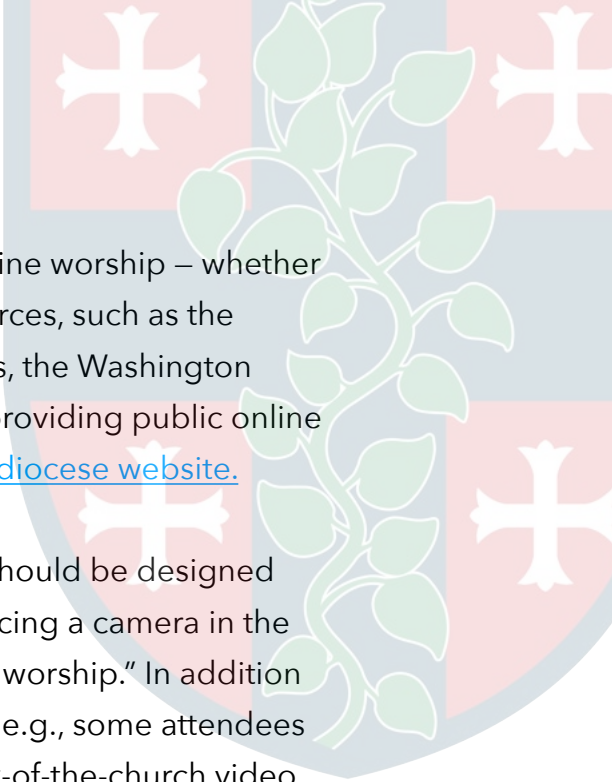
Beginning July 1, indoor and outdoor gatherings will be allowed with restrictions that include the use of face masks, distancing at least 6 feet away from each other, using hand sanitizer, and observation of other [guidelines issued by the state of New Hampshire](#). The church’s recommendations for regathering rely on a continued downward trajectory of the virus.

It is important to emphasize that congregations are not required by the Bishop to regather. In-person worship and events have real risks, and it will require significant energy to gather in-person in a way that minimizes risk.



It is now the work of each congregation’s leadership to discern the way forward for their church. The Bishop and the Diocesan staff seek to provide tools to address questions and concerns as you discern your way forward.

As you consider the possibility of regathering for in-person worship, meetings or other events, please work with your vestry or form a COVID-19 planning team. We urge you to use this document, [Resuming Care-Filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic](#), to plan whether, or how, to resume in-person worship, meetings, and church events.



Your congregation should continue to have access to online worship – whether you produce it yourself or you direct them to other resources, such as the Liturgy of the Word with Bishop Rob on Sunday mornings, the Washington National Cathedral, or by “visiting” other local churches providing public online worship. [More information and links are available on the diocese website.](#)

Whether live streamed or pre-recorded, online worship should be designed intentionally, with an online audience in mind. Simply placing a camera in the church for a conventional in-person service is not “online worship.” In addition to poor audio/video quality issues and privacy concerns (e.g., some attendees may not wish to be recorded receiving communion) back-of-the-church video of an in-person worship service may make it even more difficult emotionally for those at home, who will see other people at church.

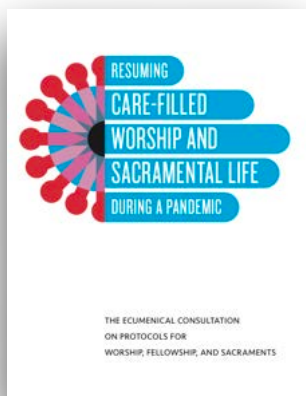
Also consider how important modeling appropriate behavior is. Yes, it will be awkward to wear a mask while preaching; it will be awkward to keep stopping and using hand sanitizer; but the more you do it, the more comfortable it will become for you, and the better role model you will be for your congregation.

Church leaders are expected to “lead with love,” adhering to the protocols as currently defined by civic authorities and the recommendations in this and related resource documents. Church leaders may need to discuss how to respond pastorally if members of a congregation find it difficult to abide by the protocols.

What Might Regathering Look Like for Our Church?

Safely regathering for in-person worship and events will require planning, preparation, and careful discernment. Regathering will require a significant amount of effort and a great deal of diligence. There are recognized risks in regathering, and it must be accomplished in a way that does not put at-risk populations or the community in danger of a surge in COVID-19 outbreaks.

Planning and Preparation



- Your vestry and/or COVID-19 planning group will need time to develop a plan, prepare the building, train volunteers, update your database and communications systems, and prepare the congregation. Begin to regather only when you are ready. We remind all that no church is required to regather in-person at this time.
- Please use [Resuming Care-Filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic](#), to plan whether, or how, to resume in-person worship, meetings, and church events.
- Churches will need to stock sufficient supplies for cleaning and disinfecting, as well as protective equipment like masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer. The church will need to provide clean masks to anyone attending a gathering who does not have one.

Worship Services

- Individuals who are over 65 or who have underlying conditions which put them at risk of serious illness if they contract the virus should continue to stay at home.
- Outdoor worship, meetings, and events are now allowed. For the next 2-3 months, while the weather is good, planning worship and meetings outdoors is safer than indoors. The same protocols regarding masks, distancing, and cleaning must be in place, but there is less risk and it is easier to maintain physical spacing.
- Also beginning now – and only if you have appropriate clearing and disinfecting strategies in place – very small groups of well-distanced people may go into church buildings in order to produce elements of worship for online services, such as preaching, reading, or playing music.
- Indoor worship, meetings, and events are allowed after July 1, and only after your COVID-19 planning team has worked through all of the requirements and issues outlined in [Resuming Care-Filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic](#).
- State guidelines for indoor worship allow for up to 50% capacity. In order to meet physical distancing requirements, the actual capacity of your building may be much lower. Each congregation must discern what is most appropriate for their church – they best understand their building's design, layout, and ventilation.
- Baptism, confirmation, and other sacraments that require laying on of hands can restart slowly, with full precautions in place.
- Baptisms may be adapted so that the parent holds the child while water is poured over the head of the child. Masks must be worn, with a small number of people, well-distanced, in attendance. The only contact should be at the unction, with hand sanitizing done before and after.
- Clergy who are at risk or vulnerable in any way should not lead in-person worship. Continue to minister online and via phone. Collaborate with

colleagues and other congregations who can offer what you cannot – not every congregation or clergy person has to offer everything. Use your gifts in ways that do not put you at risk.

Practices and Rituals

- There should be no physical touching, such as passing the peace.
- There should also be no passing of objects between participants, such as offering plates, prayer books, hymnals, or bulletins.
- Churches may allow households to take BCPs and hymnals home, label them with their names, use them for online worship at home, and bring them back to church for their use only. Projection, such as PowerPoint, may also be used.
- If printed bulletins are made available, members should pick them up themselves – online bulletins are encouraged as well.
- Group singing has been found to be a dangerously effective way of transmitting the coronavirus. Singing is not permitted at this time. Instrumental music is allowed, as is pre-recorded music – that follows all safety guidelines.
- Please pay particular attention to the sections of [Resuming Care-Filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic](#) that address singing, unison speaking, preaching, and music.

Community Gatherings and Social Events

- Food pantries, AA and recovery, and other community-based group meetings may be permitted at the discretion of each congregation. Church thrift stores may reopen but please be aware that thrift stores will be required to follow state guidelines for retail stores as well as guidelines for places of worship.
- All those using the building must agree to limit the number of people in the room to 50% capacity. In order to meet physical distancing requirements,

the actual capacity of your meeting spaces may be much lower. Groups must sanitize the space completely after leaving.

- Distribution of shared food, and social time such as coffee hour, as well as Sunday School and Nursery, are still not recommended.
- Packaged food or meal distribution in the context of food pantries is allowed.
- If church buildings are used by groups of any size, scrupulous cleaning and sanitizing systems will need to be in place for any areas that are touched or used – before, between, and after use.

Record-Keeping and Contact Tracing

- Recognizing the guiding principle of the well-being of our neighbors, we recommend that all churches keep accurate lists of attendees at any church function and have emergency communication plans in place should someone who has attended a church function test positive for COVID-19. Organizers of church events will cooperate with authorized contact tracers.
- Churches should limit access to the building and make a good faith effort to track who is attending their services and events.
 - We recommend you keep a log of who goes in and out – create sign-in sheets and collect name, email, and phone number so that you can contact people if anyone who is there at the same time tests positive.
 - You may tell people you will not share this information – it will only be used for emergency communication and will not be kept for more than two weeks.
 - If someone tests positive for COVID-19, the church should post this information to their website and/or Facebook page.
- If any person refuses to provide their information, they will need to check your website or Facebook page for information and updates – if they do not share their information, the church cannot be responsible for contacting them.

Offering Holy Eucharist

The Church recognizes the genuine spiritual hunger we all have for the Holy Eucharist, and our deep, collective yearning for its return. As we are able to regather gradually, the following guidelines are to be observed.

- Communion may be offered with bread only.
 - Individual households may bring their own bread, place it on the altar for consecration, and retrieve it for their own consumption.
 - Communion wafers may be used, handled with appropriate care, and laid out so that they may be retrieved or distributed in a sanitary fashion.
- At this time, please do not offer wine as part of Communion.
- Eucharist may also be celebrated without consuming the elements. The Bishop is permitting the prayer of consecration without the consuming of the elements. The celebrant may break bread, but not for general use – and should wash their hands prior to consecration and after.

Contemplating Church During This Time of Unexpected Quiet



This has been an extraordinary time for reflection in our lives. Discerning what is essential, how is God calling us along new paths – toward light and community in Christ?

- Where are we seeing the gifts of creativity and innovation?
- How are we dedicating ourselves to our relationships with each other and seeing our love in action?
- How can we slow down enough to listen to what we are learning and how God is calling us into something new?
- What has it felt like to set aside the centrality of our Eucharistic worship?
- Are we being called to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters before returning to the altar?
- Are we in a time of extended “slow motion sharing of the peace” before we practice our reconciliation with Christ through Body and Blood again?
- How does our mission to live as Christ in the world remain, but, how are some of our fundamental assumptions about how we do this being challenged and changed?
- How can we foster habits of tenderness, humility, kindness, and gentleness with each other as we seek to return from our respective places of “exile?”