

The Diocese of Southern Ohio

Updated Guidelines for Public Worship for Lent

February 10, 2021

The following guidelines are intended as helpful tools for your decision to both attend and offer worship as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread. The guidelines are designed to go into effect on Ash Wednesday and through Lent, unless revision is advisable based on the course of the pandemic in Southern Ohio. Nonetheless, continuing to offer online worship is expected for the foreseeable future.

Bishop Price has called a COVID-19 Medical Task Force, made up of medical and public health professionals from around the diocese. The task force has met and will work closely with the bishop going forward. Based on their council and new understandings of the COVID-19 pandemic spread, we offer six factors for consideration:

1. Mandatory masking and social distancing work when used with other mitigation measures and should be enforced rigorously.
2. It appears that the COVID-19 spread is moderating slightly. However, all Ohio counties continue to accumulate new cases of COVID-19 at rates several times higher than the CDC's goals for congregant activities.
3. Vaccinations are underway (**and strongly encouraged!**) However, even after vaccination, mitigation measures will be required. Maximum immunity is not attained until two weeks after the second vaccination (Pfizer and Moderna). Maximum immunity is about 94% for Moderna, 90% for Pfizer (not 100%) and does not mean one cannot still be a virus spreader. It also does not mean that one cannot contract COVID-19 after vaccination. Masking and physical distancing must continue after vaccination.
4. Scientific studies show that transmission by surface contact, including from objects in the environment, is negligible with frequent hand hygiene and avoidance of touching one's face. While cleaning and disinfection procedures are still recommended, we are encouraged by the limited role of surface transmission.
5. Youth and children's ministry is possible, but the risk of transmission must be reduced by following strict masking, social distancing and hygiene protocols, and planning. Advanced planning and standard operating procedures are needed for these programs. Programs may not look like children's ministry programs of the past. Even very young children ages 2 and up can follow masking guidelines, to the best of their ability.
6. Adequate ventilation, filtration quality, and appropriate maintenance of HVAC systems is a critical aspect of reducing potential transmission in our parish facilities.



Mitigation of risks

In light of these factors, we offer these revised guidelines:

- When the Ohio Public Health Advisory Alert level is purple, no in-person, in-building worship is permitted. Live stream and prerecorded worship with less than 10 people participating is encouraged.
Note: the Ohio Department of Health has issued a public health order restricting mass gatherings of more than 10 persons, although religious institutions have been exempted.
- When the Ohio Public Health Advisory is red, orange or yellow, in-person, in-building worship, including “bread only” communion, is cautiously permitted with the following guidance:
 - » When a congregation chooses to meet in person, people should be encouraged to self-check their temperatures before leaving home and should not attend if they are not feeling well or if they have had possible exposure to COVID-19. Churches should have members sign in or register their attendance for each service to facilitate contact tracing in the event of an outbreak.
 - » Mandatory Masking
 - » Social Distancing of individuals and family groups as dictated by the size of the worship space
 - » Frequent hand washing or sanitizing
 - » No congregational or choir singing (a cantor at least 20 feet away is permissible)
 - » Robust ventilation in the worship space is needed. Services should not be held back to back to allow the HVAC system time to fully utilize filtration capabilities between services.
 - » Worship services as short as possible
 - » Bread-only Communion distributed in a way which minimizes congregational mixing and risk to the clergy/lay Eucharistic ministers
 - » Mixing and visiting between parishioners before and after services should be avoided. Dismissing participants by rows may be a helpful tool to minimize visiting.
- The above mitigation strategies should also be reasonably applied when counties move into orange and yellow designations.

Based on the evolving scientific knowledge regarding the transmission of the virus, the focus is away from metrics and toward mitigation practices. Mitigation practices include masking and distancing, and the need for adequate ventilation. It is recommended that HVAC service providers examine church ventilation systems to be sure that they are working efficiently with the appropriate filtration engaged. Interior doors and outside windows should remain open during worship whenever possible.

The greatest risk of spread is the exchange of breath particles between people when they are within six feet of each other. Case studies show that transmission of the virus can occur when people let their guard down during informal gatherings before and after services, when people are standing close together, conversing, and eating/drinking. Coffee and social hours should not occur indoors at this time.

Mental Health

A renewed recognition of the toll the pandemic is taking on mental health is essential. Our inability to stay connected to each other in person is having a devastating impact on both children and adults.

Isolation has particularly impacted many parishioners who do not have internet access. Our homebound parishioners are especially vulnerable and short visits may be considered if appropriate planning for safety has occurred. Phone trees to check in on all members of a congregation are encouraged.

Personal Responsibility

Individuals must continue to monitor themselves. When someone is ill or has symptoms, that person should not attend church, go to work, or go to other gatherings until they exhibit no further symptoms or are cleared by their health professional. Most of the reported church-related outbreaks of COVID-19 disease occurred when someone went to a church function while sick.

Individuals in isolation or quarantine for COVID-19 disease must follow CDC restrictions until isolation or quarantine ends. Typically, this is 10 days following the diagnosis of active COVID infection.

Individuals must assume responsibility for managing their own health and decisions about their activities during this public health emergency. Proper mask use, social distancing, hand hygiene, not touching our faces, and environmental measures such as adequate ventilation and cleaning can decrease, but not eliminate, the risk of coronavirus transmission in churches and elsewhere.

If people find themselves in a situation in which they feel uncomfortable with the level of protections against transmission of the coronavirus (for example, some people not wearing masks properly or people frequently intermingling), they are justified in leaving that environment.



Useful links

Our [COVID-19 Resources page](#) includes links to

- [Phased Return to Increasing Parish Life](#)
- [Guidelines for Holy Communion, Confirmation and Reception](#)
- [Guidelines for singing during COVID.](#)
- [Ohio Public Health Advisory System](#)
- [Search for COVID-19 cases by zip code](#)
- [Ventilation resources](#) from the CDC, EPA and others

With the guidance of the COVID-19 Medical Task Force, we will continue to provide additional information on topics such mental health resources, children's ministries (including vacation bible school) and summer camp.

Questions regarding the diocesan guidelines for in-person worship during COVID-19 may be directed to the Rev. Canon John R. Johanssen, Canon to the Ordinary (jjohanssen@diosohio.org), or Carine de Lange, Operations Executive (cdelange@diosohio.org).