



To: Rectors and Priests-in-Charge of the Diocese of Nebraska
From: Bishop Barker
Date: May 26, 2020
Re: Re-Opening our Churches for Worship

Beloved in Christ –

It's often said that human beings were created to worship. If we ever doubted that truth, we've surely been convinced of it by the outbreak of COVID-19. We're missing our sacred spaces, our sisters and brothers in Christ, and sharing in the sacraments of the Church. Our hearts are aching as we long to gather in worship again just as soon as we safely can. All of us have felt these losses very keenly, but none more than you whose lives and ministries are ordered in large part around gathering the people of God and leading Christ's body in prayer. Thank you again for your support living into our current public worship moratorium. I know that it's a sacrifice. I am also certain that it has saved some of our church members from illness, if not death. Our current moratorium on public worship extends through June 28.

We are wise to remember that worship services continue to be lifted up as one of the two or three most dangerous possible public gatherings in this time of global pandemic. The reasons for this are three-fold: the way we worship (large groups, physical touching, singing, etc.), the population we gather with (including many high-risk individuals), and unlike a corporate or business setting, a high probability of uncompliant activity on the part of those gathered (we can't "make" anybody worship according to our rules.) It's for these reasons we closed our churches early and extended our public worship moratorium, and it's for these same reasons that we will now begin to re-enter our buildings for worship with the utmost care.

The enclosed materials are meant to give you a simple framework for deciding when to resume public worship. It will be challenging to do this safely, and I want to therefore urge you on two points. First, the decision about when to re-start needs to be made in prayerful consultation with your parish leadership. While this decision ultimately belongs to the Rector by canon, none of us has the resources to manage such a thing without the full cooperation of all concerned. Second, I urge you to weigh these matters in the most conservative light possible. *All* of the good we've achieved by cancelling public worship these many months could be undone on a single Sunday morning if we're not as careful as we can be about this work. The reason we're providing this communication weeks before the moratorium is lifted is so that you and your parish leadership will have plenty of time to develop and communicate a plan.

The parishes of our diocese are different in every way. The material provided here – including especially the linked and attached resources - includes up-to-date information you will need to examine carefully and apply in light of the particularities of your congregation. The work to re-open will look different in our parish churches depending on numerous local factors including current infection rates, building size, congregation size, worship customs and more. Know that there are heightened risks associated with some worship activities – such as singing and Holy Communion – which will require extra work to resume safely and should therefore be considered with special care. When public worship is resumed, there is no case where it will look just like it did in early March.

I expect to be notified when you have made all the arrangements to return to public worship safely and I will grant permission for resuming public worship on a case-by-case basis. The details of how to do so in your specific context are yours to discern and execute. I will provide every additional helpful resource I can, but ultimately it is your pastoral wisdom and the support of your parish leaders that will be essential in finding the best way to accomplish this work.

Let me finally remind you that I have no expectation any parish church will reopen for in-person worship on the first Sunday in July. Many congregations will not yet be able to meet the enclosed criteria for opening at that time, and others may simply discern that it's too difficult or too dangerous to try and do so at that early date. You will have my full support if you and your leaders make the cautious call to wait longer to begin re-entry.

Thank you again for your fortitude and faith as we have endeavored to be the Church these past months. It is my cherished hope that you and the people we serve will soon be able to return to your church building and gather to worship Jesus in person. The enclosed materials are meant to help us achieve that shared goal as soon as we safely can, and your diocesan staff are ready to consult and assist along the way.

Faithfully Yours –

+ Bishop Barker

Planning to Resume Public Worship – July 2020 The Diocese of Nebraska

Defining Your Community

Our current moratorium on public worship extends through June 28, 2020.

The first step in creating a parish re-entry plan is to **define your community**. For the purposes of your plan, your community is a circle stretching to include your furthest-commuting parishioner. For many congregations, this means your community includes not just the county where your church is located, but neighboring counties (and perhaps neighboring states) where parishioners live. In order to certify that COVID-19 cases have been declining for at least 14 days before parish re-entry, you must confirm this is true for every county in your church community.¹

Approval for Re-Entry

If the answer is affirmative to both of these statements, your church may create a re-entry plan and submit to the Bishop's office for approval:

- COVID-19 cases have been declining in my church's community for at least 14 consecutive days.²
- Residents of my church's community who have COVID-19 symptoms have the ability to be tested for the virus.

Expectations for Re-Entry

Based on factors such as building size, membership, population vulnerability, and likelihood of compliance, re-entry plans will vary. Details such as how to scale attendance in order to accommodate safe seating, how to remove or mitigate objects and barriers that require or invite touch, whether and how to track attendance and seating, etc., will require thought and detailed planning unique to each congregation.^{3 4} There are, however, a number of **protocols that must be met by every congregation**:

- Clergy, church employees, and volunteers must practice healthy hygiene.

¹ <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx>

² Percent positivity rate would be an ideal measure of community spread/decline, though may not be available in every community.

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>

⁴ <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Documents/COVID-19-Guidelines-for-the-Conduct-of-Faith-Based-Services.pdf>

- Safety practices must be clearly communicated before and during in-person gatherings. Church members should be aware of safety practices before arriving and the practices should be visibly and clearly posted at every point of entry in your church.
- Every person must wear a mask *at least* upon entering and departing the church building.
- At all times, every person must remain at least six feet away from all other persons who do not live within their household.
- No live singing is permitted, with the exception of a single vocalist positioned at least 20 feet away from any other person. Vocalists are not permitted to sing from a balcony or platform that is raised above other people.
- Objects may not be shared or distributed. This includes paper (i.e. bulletins and books) and food/drink (i.e. receptions and coffee hours).
- Closely following the CDC/EPA guidelines, every space within your building must be fully disinfected between uses. Hand sanitizer must be readily available.⁵
- Remote worship must continue as an “equally attractive alternative” to in-person worship.
- Congregants known to be infectious or symptomatic, or who live in a household with someone who is infectious or symptomatic, should refrain from attending public worship.
- If COVID-19 cases increase in your church’s community, public worship must be suspended until cases continue to decline.

Worship

Common prayer remains a core value of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Nebraska. Morning Prayer, ante-communion, and other contactless liturgies are both physically safe(r) and liturgically rich forms of worship highly recommended in this season. Several aspects of Holy Communion present significantly increased risks to worshippers. If you wish to re-introduce the public celebration of Holy Eucharist to your congregation, we have provided guidelines for doing so in a safe fashion. Implementation of these guidelines may vary according to your local context, but the risk factors addressed here must be mitigated in order to resume celebrating the Eucharist. Baptism and anointing are permitted at the cleric’s discretion if the cleric is wearing gloves and a mask. If it is possible to worship outdoors, please consider doing so for as long as it is seasonally appropriate.

Building and Grounds

As you develop your congregation’s re-entry plan, please read with care the CDC guidelines for community and faith-based organizations. The CDC’s guidelines for disinfecting must be

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>

adhered to. Be thoughtful about all of the places that people commonly touch (i.e. door handles, railings, water fountains, dispensers, etc.) and plan for ways to limit their use.

Next Steps

None of us knows how long this season of our common life will continue. We will continue to monitor the spread (and decline) of COVID-19 in Nebraska and will release a new set of protocols for our next phase of re-entry when the numbers of new infections in Nebraska near zero and testing and tracking of cases remains widespread.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to be in touch with the Bishop's Office directly.

**Planning to Resume Public Worship
Parish Re-Entry Application
Diocese of Nebraska**

Please complete the form on this page in full, checking all appropriate boxes.

*You will be contacted by the bishop's office as soon as possible after receipt of this form,
to discuss and approve your plans for resuming public worship.*

Church Name:

City:

Counties that Define our Community:

Please certify the following:

COVID-19 cases in our community have been declining for at least 14 consecutive days.

Residents of our community who have COVID-19 symptoms have the ability to be tested for the virus.

We have read with care the CDC guidelines for Community and Faith Based Organization and have a plan in place for appropriately disinfecting our building between uses.

We have a communication plan in place for informing congregants about our safety guidelines.

We agree to conform to the guidelines for all Diocese of Nebraska parishes outlined in "Planning to Resume Public Worship – July 2020" including the guidelines in the linked and attached resources.

Signed:

Rector/Priest-in-charge _____

Senior Warden _____

The guidelines below were written by the Rev. Dan Hall, MD, who is an Episcopal priest, surgeon and professor of surgery at the University of Pittsburgh. They are very detailed and perhaps “burdensome” as Dr. Hall notes, but they also represent the kind of care and effort that will be required of those who wish to resume public celebration of the Holy Eucharist with proper attention to both the sacramental theology of the Church and infectious disease safety protocols in a time of global pandemic.

Model Procedure for Holy Eucharist in Setting of Pandemic

The Rev. Daniel E Hall, MD

General Principles

1. The following instructions may appear overly detailed and burdensome. This is to ensure that every action and movement is planned and deliberate. However, the new procedures need not impede piety and they will shortly be mastered and made routine in ways that will make them appear and feel effortless and natural.
2. No touch distribution is preferred because gloves used as personal protective equipment are intended to protect the person wearing the gloves not the people with whom s/he is interacting. Gloves can be used to protect people with whom the one wearing gloves is interacting (as is done for surgery), but that requires a different kind of glove and significant training on how to don/doff those gloves.
 1. No touch distribution employs some kind of forceps or tongs that can be dipped/cleaned in >60% alcohol and used to distribute the consecrated host. Something like this might be suitable: https://www.amazon.com/Scientific-Labwares-Stainless-Application-Straight/dp/B07V4J5L2N/ref=zg_bs_11312348011_41?encoding=UTF8&refRID=H2BZC355N7YD7PWVEBJ8&th=1
 2. No touch distribution employs some kind of plate, paper or otherwise, to affect the transfer from one person to the other. Ideally, the plate should be marked or oriented in a way that clarifies where the priest/assistant touched the plate so the communicant can avoid touching the same area. The communicant picks up the plate with nondominant hand, uses dominant hand to lift the sacrament to their mouth, and then immediately releases the plate into an open bin. Paper seems most expedient because they can be thrown away (rather than washed) and because the plate will not break when dropped from a distance into the open bin. Reusable plates might be considered, but there is risk of contamination by touching a previously deposited plates when lowering (rather than dropping) the plate into the open bin.
3. Masking is mandatory when within 6 feet of Eucharistic elements because, in addition to physical touch, the other potential source of viral contamination is from respiratory droplets or aerosols. This is most important during the preparation of the elements and during their distribution of the sacrament.
4. Eucharistic elements should be prepared in advance of any service—not in the chancel or during the service—because clean technique is complex, and one contaminating mistake means you have to discard the lot and start again. Much preferred would be to

do it in advance of the service, likely in the sacristy, and ideally with another set of eyes watching to note any breaks in technique. Redundant scrutiny is employed by surgical staff in operating rooms—everyone helping each other to recognize errors and maintain technique.

5. Covered ciborium is preferred to open paten—again to minimize droplet/aerosol contamination during the eucharistic prayer. If no ciborium is available, an extra chalice may be used with a pall serving as a cover. If formal vessels are not available, Tupperware with a lid accomplishes the task.
6. Wafers are preferred to freshly baked bread to minimize crumbs.
7. Communication in one kind is sufficient. Individual cups of wine are discouraged because there is no easily feasible option for no touch transfer of the individual cups. Should communication in both kinds be desired, the following procedure may be considered.
 1. Use an eyedropper or small straw may to deposit a single drop of wine onto a host. As noted in #3 above, this should be done *before* the service with unconsecrated or pre-consecrated wine. These may then be loaded into a ciborium for use during the Eucharistic prayer.

Before the Service

1. In the sacristy or some other suitable place, and ideally with the assistance of another person whose purpose is to observe and maintain clean technique, prepare the elements that will be distributed.
2. Sanitize hands first.
3. Don mask
4. Sanitize hands again. If hands subsequently touch the mask, face, mouth, or any other body part, sanitize again before proceeding.
5. Ensure all communion vessels are clean and dry.
6. Portion out needed wafers (not fresh bread) into a covered vessel, ciborium or otherwise.
 - a. If communication in both kinds preferred, arrange wafers on a clean tray, placing a single drop of wine in the center of each. Let dry before loading into covered vessel.
7. Prepare cruet, chalice, paten and priest's host sufficient to communicate only the presiding priest.
8. Thoroughly clean selected tong or forceps $\geq 60\%$ alcohol (100% isopropyl alcohol may be most convenient); when dry wrap in purificator.
9. Move all vessels to the altar or credence table as per custom, including the wrapped tong or forceps.
10. Sanitize hands
11. Doff mask
12. Sanitize hands.

During the service

1. Place alcohol based hand sanitizer in chancel near altar and/or credence table

2. During offertory, sanitize hands
3. Don mask
4. Sanitize hands again. If hands subsequently touch the mask, face, mouth, or any other body part, sanitize again before proceeding.
5. Move vessels to altar and prepare the table, keeping ciborium covered. This should be done by a single person walking back and forth rather than the traditional exchange of vessels between president and assistant.
6. Sanitize hands
7. Doff mask
8. Preside at the Eucharist as per usual. Ciborium should remain covered throughout the prayer, including the epiclesis. Only the presiding priest touches the vessels and consumes open and exposed elements (e.g., priests' host and wine). After communicating him/herself, the presiding minister distributes the sacrament.
9. Distribution
 - a. Sanitize hands
 - b. Don mask
 - c. Sanitize hands again.
 - d. Retrieve cleaned tong/forceps from purificator
 - e. Uncover ciborium
 - f. Use tong/forceps to place single (for individual) or multiple (for families) hosts onto a single plate, either at the rail or in a station
 - i. At rail, an assistant can place individual plates 6 feet apart, orienting the marked edge of the plate away from the communicant and showing where it has been touched. After the assistant steps 6 feet away from the rail, the presiding minister approaches each plate, placing the sacrament in the center of each, being careful not to contaminate the tong/forceps on the plate or the outside of the ciborium. The presiding minister then steps 6 feet away from the rail while the communicants step forward, maintaining 6 feet separation from each other, collect the plate, communicate themselves and deposit the used plate in an open bin as they return to their seats.
 - ii. At a station, the assistant places a single plate onto a small table accessible to both the presiding minister and the communicant, orienting the marked and touched edge of the plate away from the communicant, showing where it has been touched. After the assistant has stepped 6 feet away, the presiding minister approaches the plate, placing the sacrament in the center, being careful not to contaminate the tong/forceps on the plate or the outside of the ciborium. The presiding minister then steps 6 feet away from the rail while the communicant steps forward, maintaining 6 feet separation from each other, collect the plate, communicate themselves and deposit the used plate in an open bin as they return to their seats.
 - iii. Family units may receive portions sufficient for the entire family on a single plate, communicating each other by hand.

- g. Cover the ciborium and stow the tongs/forceps
- h. Sanitize hands
- i. Doff mask
- j. Sanitize hands

After the service for distribution to those at a distance

1. In the sacristy or some other suitable place, and ideally with the assistance of another person whose purpose is to observe and maintain clean technique, prepare the elements that will be distributed at a distance.
2. Sanitize hands first.
3. Don mask
4. Sanitize hands again. If hands subsequently touch the mask, face, mouth, or any other body part, sanitize again before proceeding.
5. Arrange on counter small paper bags sufficient for your need, leaving each open and standing on the counter
6. Carefully clean tong/forceps with alcohol
7. Clean hand held stapler.
8. Carefully clean outside of ciborium and remove lid
9. Sanitize hands again
10. Use tong/forceps to portion consecrated sacrament into paper bags—single or multiple as may be indicated for the shut-in household.
11. Cover ciborium
12. Close, fold and staple shut the paper bags. Arrange them in a larger container so they can be moved to a car without touching them again.
13. Sanitize hands
14. Doff mask
15. Sanitize hands.

Delivery of sacrament to shut-in households

1. Sanitize hands first.
2. Don mask
3. Sanitize hands again. If hands subsequently touch the mask, face, mouth, or any other body part, sanitize again before proceeding
4. Touching only the outer surfaces of the container in which the sacrament-containing paper bags are arranged, move the container to the transport vehicle.
5. Place hand sanitizer in the car next to the bags.
6. Drive to the household, ring bell or contact resident on telephone. Greet them at the door wearing a mask and maintaining 6 feet of separation.
7. Give an account for the hope that is in you and the promises of the Gospel.
8. When it is time to distribute the sacrament, return to your vehicle
 - a. Sanitize hands
 - b. Don mask
 - c. Sanitize hands
 - d. Collect bag(s) with sufficient sacrament.

- e. Place them 6 feet from the door, step away and let communicant collect the bag
- f. Explain to the communicant that they should bring the bag inside, tear it open, pour the sacrament out of the bag onto a plate, dispose of the bag, wash their hands and only then grasp and consume the sacrament.
- g. Alternatively, a single paper plate may be placed at some convenient place 6 feet from the door marked and orient as describe above, being careful to keep the plate clean except for the single point of contact. The paper bag could be opened by the distributing minister, pouring the sacrament onto the plate, and then stepping 6 feet away. The communicant could then approach the plate and communicate as at the station described above.