

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH RE-GATHERING TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS DURING COVID-19

Adopted by the Vestry on September 15, 2020

The research and writing of this report was done under some basic assumptions. The first assumption is that one of the duties of clergy and lay members of Christ Episcopal Church, Norwich (CEC), as Christians and citizens, is to remain healthy ourselves, as it is in our power, and to protect one another's health by safe practices at all times, not only when we are in church but also when we are doing God's work in the world. The second assumption is that, although we have been isolated from one another for six months and are anxious to get back to in-person worship, we need to be mindful of the advice and guidance we have been getting periodically during the pandemic from the bishops of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut and from our local Uncas Health District. Accordingly, this Task Force has studied the recommendations of both of these organizations and of a consortium of bishops and religious leaders of other denominations. We present to the Vestry and the Priest-in-Charge the following recommendations for practices to be followed at such time as we finally begin conducting services at 78 Washington Street. We recommend these services begin during Phase 3 of the Governor's Connecticut Reopening Plan. *[Note: Governor Lamont announced on September 24 that Phase 3 will begin October 8, 2020.]*

The practices and service details we are recommending are based on current understanding of COVID, its current mutations and how it is transmitted. Therefore, the recommendations may need be updated at any time as new information comes to light about the virus and its reach. Due to the uncertainty of what Connecticut's Phase 4 will entail, we will offer a revised set of recommendations when we are closer to that time.

I. Necessary Alterations, Additions to or Modifications of the Use of the Physical Plant During Connecticut Reopening Phase 3

We are not suggesting any major repairs or alterations to the worship space. Some changes will be necessary to limit the ways we use it and the office area.

A. Access to worship space

- Before services, open doors to main entrance off upper (South) parking lot, including handicapped access door. Keep all other exterior doors locked during the service and during the week, except for necessary church business.
- Rope off stairs leading to kitchen and former choir room in the basement. No one should enter the worship space from the stairs.
- Keep lift working and allow access to the parish hall for rest room use by elderly or disabled persons.
- A seating plan that allows for social distancing should be devised and posted near the main entrance. (See Appendix A: Seating Plan.) Every other pew should be roped off and/or marked as closed.

B. Other access

- Access to office wing is limited to the Senior and Property Wardens, the Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer, the Parish Clerk, a limited number of office volunteers and the Priest-in-Charge.
- Access to the Parish hall door is limited to the above persons and the Altar Guild
- Access to the West Wing door (off South parking lot) is limited to the Senior and Property Wardens and Norwich Interfaith Food Pantry volunteers.

C. Cleaning of building

- If we offer one service per week, it will eliminate a great deal of extra cleaning and disinfecting on Sundays. Otherwise, all the procedures required will have to be performed between services as well as before and after.
- Entire nave, sanctuary, vesting room and sacristy will be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized before the first service is held, preferably by a professional cleaning service.
- Routine cleaning of sacristy and sanctuary (altar area) will be conducted by Altar Guild, as is our usual practice.
- Cushions should be cleaned and/or stored away to leave only hard surfaces that may be wiped down or sprayed weekly with anti-viral cleaners.
- Prayer books and hymnals will be removed from the racks behind each pew.
- Flyers and all other materials will be removed from the tract racks.
- Interior and exterior of lift is to be thoroughly cleaned, then wiped down weekly.
- One stairway to the parish hall and rest rooms is to be thoroughly cleaned, then stair rails wiped down weekly.
- Office spaces need to be cleaned thoroughly between uses and access to office extremely limited.
- Rest rooms should be thoroughly cleaned before the first service is held and weekly thereafter. Supplies and instructions should be provided in the rest rooms so that those using them can wipe down appropriate surfaces after themselves.
- Norwich Interfaith Food Pantry, access areas and bathroom will be cleaned by food pantry volunteers before food pantry can reopen and after each week's distribution.

D. Needed Supplies and Services

- Six (6) hand sanitizer stations should be set up: one at the main entrance, two in front of the men's and women's rooms on the Parish hall level, one at the office door, one at the Parish hall entrance and one at the entrance to the West Wing. Costs will vary depending on the type of station set up.
- Homemade cleaner for spraying surfaces can be made out of a mixture of bleach and water. For wood surfaces, such as pews and altar rails, Murphy's oil soap should be added and surfaces wiped down with paper towels immediately. Gallon sprayers for cleaning large areas should be purchased.
- Eight (8) containers of pop-up anti-viral wipes, such as Lysol, at strategic locations to allow for quick disinfection of surfaces between uses.
- Two to four (2-4) boxes Disposable masks for those who do not bring their own. (Costco, \$15 per box of 50; may be cheaper elsewhere.)
- Laminated signs for entrances and other key spots, such as rest rooms, sacristy, delineating rules and procedures.
- Printing disposable weekly service bulletins.

II-A. Necessary Behavioral Changes for Indoor Services During Phase 3

In order to comply with Episcopal Church of Connecticut and Uncas Health District guidelines, the entire congregation and any groups using the building will have to make changes in the way we interact and move about our worship space and other spaces.

When the suggested rules and protocols below are finalized and approved by the Vestry and Priest-in-Charge, a simplified version of them should be sent to the parish before the first service is scheduled, using the postal service as well as e-mail. We might call it something like "What to Expect When We Gather Again at CEC." Also, a questionnaire should be included in this mailing to determine how many parishioners feel safe returning to in-person worship under these protocols.

Rules and protocols will be displayed prominently at the church entrance, at the top of the stairwell leading to the bathrooms, at the elevator door and in the bathrooms. Reminders will be read at the beginning of each service by the celebrant or lay officiant. Ushers will also remind people of the rules if needed, especially when there are visitors that are not normally part of the congregation.

- *Occupancy limits:* According to diocesan and health district guidelines, we can seat either one quarter of the church's maximum capacity (400 at CEC) or 100 people, whichever is smaller. In our case, the numbers are the same—100. As new COVID cases increase or decrease in the State of Connecticut, that number may move up or down.
- *Who may enter:* Parishioners will be asked to stay home if they are ill or have any symptoms currently known to be associated with COVID, including reduced sense of taste or smell, fever, diarrhea, persistent cough, shortness of breath, etc., or if they know they have been exposed to or have tested positive for COVID (see Section IV). Newcomers and other unknown attendees will be asked if they have shown any of these symptoms within the last few weeks. Current guidance from Uncas Health District is that we do not need to take temperatures of people entering the church.
- *Contact tracing:* For contact tracing, should anyone in the parish become ill with COVID, we need a record of who has attended any given service. Parishioners will be given the opportunity to register for the service online up to the day before. A list of expected attendees and their phone numbers will be printed, and one person will be responsible for taking attendance. If anyone comes into the church that is not on the list, he or she will be asked to leave a name and telephone number. At the end of the service, the attendance list will be stored in the vesting room near the service log book.
- *Masks:* Every person will wear a mask at all times. Ushers will have disposable masks to offer to anyone who does not have one. Celebrants and officiants will wear them to enter and exit the area where the service is held, whether in the sanctuary or at the lecterns. Celebrant and/or officiants may remove their masks to conduct the service, providing they remain 8-12 feet apart from others. (See Appendix A: Seating Plan.) Exception: Those who cannot wear masks due to health conditions should alert the Priest-in-Charge before the first service is held. It is desirable for them to present a doctor's note, a copy of which will be kept in the church office. Parishioners and visitors who cannot wear masks will be asked, along with their families, to observe greater social distancing, at least 12 feet from other worshipers. Visitors who refuse to comply with the plan will be asked to leave.
- *Hand sanitizer:* Anyone entering the church will use hand sanitizer.
- *Microphones* will be wiped down with disposable antibacterial wipes after each service (or between the service and announcements).
- *Altar Guild:* Only two altar guild members, masked and observing social distancing, should prepare for the service or be in the sacristy or sanctuary at any time. [Further details will be worked out in consultation with the Altar Guild for Eucharist in Phase 4.]
- *Ushers:* It is important to have at least two ushers per service, both to regulate the flow of congregants and to be sure that, in this time of masks and no hand-shakes, everyone who comes in the door is greeted and made to feel welcome. Ushers will arrive ½ hour early.
- *Entrance and exit:* Because of the layout of our church and parking lots, delineating a separate entrance and exit is not practical. Everyone will enter and exit by the main door at the upper (South) parking lot and will be greeted by ushers. No one may enter from the parish hall by way of the stairs or elevator.
- *Gloves:* Ushers will wear gloves until everyone is seated.
- *Service materials:* Ushers will hand out disposable paper programs that will be carried away by attendees or disposed of by ushers after each service.

- *Placement of ushers:* After the service begins, one usher should sit near the narthex to catch latecomers and one should sit in back by the stairs leading to the rest rooms to give directions to the rest room or offer help with the lift.
- *Leaving seats during the service:* Congregants may leave their seats during the service (for bathroom breaks or any other reason) either by the center or outer aisle, whichever they are closest to, to prevent them from crossing in front of other people. They will return by the same aisle. Only one staircase will be open for going down to use the bathroom. The other will be roped off.
- *Control of seating:* Until the congregation is used to the new distancing guidelines, ushers will lead congregants to marked pews to keep every individual or family at least six feet apart. (A family is considered to be any group of persons who live with one another and/or have had daily contact with one another during the pandemic.)
- *Food and socializing:* Parishioners will need to accept that for the foreseeable future there can be no coffee hour, church suppers or any shared food. If we wish to speak to one another after the service, it would have to be done outside in the parking lot with masks worn and 6-foot social distancing observed.
- *Bathrooms* will be cleaned by professionals or committed volunteers (*see suggestions in I-C*) once per week. Congregants will be instructed, by means of written signs as well as instructions from the ushers, that people need to wipe down the bathroom when they are done, including the toilet handle and seat, sink and faucet handles, and door knobs. Disposable antibacterial/antiviral wipes and hand sanitizer will be provided.
- *Offerings:* A collection plate or basket will be kept near the entrance, into which people may drop their offerings before or after the service. No one will touch the plate except the counters, and they will wear gloves when retrieving the offerings and putting them in the safe for at least 24 hours before counting. There will be no procession, either of Eucharistic elements (Phase 4) or of monetary offerings, until the end of the COVID pandemic.
- *The Peace:* People will not leave their seats during the peace. No kissing, hugging, hand shaking or other physical signs of the Peace are permitted (except within families, as defined earlier). The celebrant/officiant will announce the Peace, and worshipers will respond with a nod, slight bow, a wave of the hand, etc.

II-B. Necessary Accommodations for Weddings and Funerals

During Phase 3 of the State of Connecticut reopening, we recommend that funerals be conducted at funeral parlors or simple graveside services be held, with memorial services planned for after the pandemic is over. As long as the weather remains warm, weddings are best held at outdoor venues. The priest-in-charge will decide when indoor weddings and funerals will be permitted in the building (perhaps during Phase 4) and when she will be able to conduct them. For pastoral reasons, the Priest-in-Charge may decide to hold a funeral in the church during Phase 3. In that case, all procedures and limits pertaining to Sunday services will be observed. Exceptions will be decided by the Priest-in-Charge.

III-A. Liturgical Choices for Indoor Worship During Phase 3

- *Continuation of virtual services:* Even after we begin worshipping in person, some kind of weekly virtual service should be offered until the pandemic is officially over in order to accommodate those who are home-bound because of illness or self-quarantine.
- *Service times:* Prior to our closing for the COVID epidemic, we had two Sunday services at CEC. To protect parishioners and to prevent extensive sanitizing between services, we recommend offering only one service, perhaps at 9 or 9:30. If weekday services are held, they should be virtual, except for on major holidays.
- *Worship space:* Services will be held in the main part of the church. The layout of the chapel will not permit safe social distancing.

- *Types of services:* We recommend following diocesan guidelines for types of worship permitted in Phase 3, such as Morning Prayer, Ante Communion (Liturgy of the Word), Spiritual Communion or other non-Eucharistic worship only. Actual Communion is reserved for Phase 4, and further recommendations will be made for it when we are close to that time. Lay people can lead all services except Spiritual Communion if the Priest-in-Charge is not available for in-person worship.
- *Scheduling:* As is our usual practice, the head of the Liturgical Committee will schedule all participants in the liturgy, keeping in mind that special re-training of all participants will need to be done. In addition to the usual positions, one person and one alternate should be assigned to take attendance at all services.
- *Celebrants and lectors:* There should be only two people serving at any service, one celebrant or lay officiant and one lector, who will read all the lessons. To cut down on movement and sharing of microphones, and so that everyone in the widely distributed congregation can hear, we recommend that Morning Prayer and other non-Eucharistic services be conducted from the lecterns at the Gospel and Epistle sides of the church. If disabilities prevent one of the leaders from climbing the stairs to the lecterns, they may use a body microphone, but this mike may not be shared by two people.
- *Music and congregational responses:* Until updated recommendations come from the diocese, there will be no choral music or congregational singing, as respiratory droplets are projected further with singing than they are with speaking. Although one interfaith document suggests no oral responses from the congregation should be allowed, we find this too severe a requirement, as it would undermine the structure and participatory element of our liturgy. We recommend instead that normal responses and prayers be allowed, as long as every person speaking is wearing a mask and is properly observing social distancing.
- *Sermons and homilies:* Sermons by the Priest-in-Charge should be kept brief. For Morning Prayer led by a lay officiant, a short homily or inspirational reading from a collection of sermons is permissible, but to keep the service short, these may be omitted altogether.
- *The Peace:* See “II. Necessary Behavioral Changes.”
- *Prayers at Spiritual Communion:* A special prayer is said during the Spiritual Communion, as chosen by the celebrant. Other prayers are the same, but the service may be shortened at the discretion of the Priest-in-Charge.
- *Dismissal:* After the dismissal, people will remain in their seats until escorted out by the ushers in an orderly fashion so that worshipers do not break social distancing rules established for the service.

III-B. Liturgical Choices and Logistics for Outdoor Worship (Phase 3)

If the Vestry and Priest-in-Charge decide to commence outdoor worship during Phase 2 or Phase 3, many of the same accommodations will be asked of worshipers as if they were indoors. For example:

- non-Eucharistic services only
- wearing of masks and observing social distancing
- use of disposable service programs
- no congregational singing
- seating controlled by ushers, except people bring their own folding chairs, or folding chairs from the church are set up in advance
- no food or drink served afterward, with social distancing observed in any conversations

In making a decision about whether or not to hold outdoor services at CEC, the Vestry and Priest-in-Charge should consider the following challenges peculiar to our location:

- We will need some sort of canopy for the celebrant/officiant and one lector, and we would need a portable lectern or music stand for each.

- If church chairs are used, they would have to be set up and sanitized ahead of the service, then taken down and sanitized after the service.
- We are on a busy intersection, and there will be a lot of traffic noise. We will have to rent or buy some kind of sound system, which may be expensive.
- Because the lower (North) lot is on a steep incline, only the upper (South) parking lot will be practical.
- We would be visible to the public, which might have the desired effect of attracting guests or newcomers to our services. Visibility might also have a negative effect, such as people who haven't been apprised of the guidelines inadvertently or deliberately breaking them.
- We would need to limit use of the bathrooms for emergencies only, and escorting or ferrying people with disabilities to the bathrooms might be a challenge. In addition, we would need to clean the bathrooms before services and in between users.
- We would have to cancel services during inclement weather, and we don't have too much time before the cold weather sets in.

IV. Monitoring Wellness and Assessing COVID Risks of Parishioners and Clergy

One of our main duties as Christians is to love and care for one another and respect one another's special needs. Therefore, we recommend the following steps to insure the wellness of our parish:

- All parishioners and/or their families are responsible for monitoring their own wellness during the pandemic and informing the Priest-in-Charge if they are ill and need pastoral care or any other kind of assistance. While the Vestry makes frequent calls to check on our members, we should expect people to be proactive in seeking both medical help and help from the church.
- Until the pandemic is over, healing prayers with laying on of hands by clergy and lay persons should be done symbolically, without actual touching.
- To keep track of one another, weekly phone calls from the Vestry should continue. In addition, a procedure has been established by which messages that come into the church office are checked daily, by an assigned person in the parish and/or the Priest-in-Charge.
- According to guidelines from the diocese, each parish's rector or priest-in-charge alone can decide whether he or she is safe to return to in-person worship. Therefore, our Priest-in-Charge is responsible for informing the Vestry of her health status and her ability to return to in-person services. If the Priest-in-Charge cannot return to in-person worship, she should conduct and record a weekly virtual service from home.
- When in-person worship resumes, parishioners need to conduct a wellness self-check at home before leaving for church, including taking one's temperature and going over a checklist of other COVID symptoms, such as loss of sense of smell or taste, difficulty breathing, persistent cough, diarrhea, etc.
- Parishioners who have been diagnosed with COVID, have been exposed to the virus, or have tested positive for it should self-quarantine and not come to church.
- After reading all the precautions and guidelines for our services, parishioners who are not ill but have underlying health risks—including but not limited to chronic asthma, COPD, diabetes, high blood pressure, autoimmune deficiency, etc.—should consult with their health care providers to determine whether they are safe to return to church.

V-A. Use of Facilities by Food Pantry

Even though the need for food assistance in our region has skyrocketed during the COVID pandemic, the Norwich Interfaith Food Pantry, partly supported by CEC, the Norwich Area Clergy Association and its associated faith congregations, had to shut down in March due to concerns of the managers and Uncas Health about maintaining a safe environment for the volunteers and the clients. Most of the leftover stock was given to St. Vincent de Paul

Place, where clients were referred. The Task Force recommends that the food pantry be allowed reopen during Phase 3 with the following provisos:

- Volunteers will wear masks and gloves when stocking or distributing food.
- Accommodations will be made for safe social distancing among volunteers and between volunteers and clients.
- Clients will not enter the building but will be served in their cars or, if they come on foot, in an area set up in the parking lot.
- Food pantry volunteers will be responsible for keeping the areas of the west wing that they occupy clean and sanitized, including interior and exterior door handles.

V-B. Use of Facilities by Outside Groups

The nonprofit groups that CEC had been hosting before the pandemic may wish to begin using our space again. If the Vestry chooses to open the building to outside groups during Phase 3, we suggest they adopt the following policies:

- No one should be using the facilities until a thorough cleaning (preferably by professionals) of the Parish hall or other designated meeting space has been accomplished.
- The Vestry will appoint a contact person to be a liaison between the Vestry and the group.
- The Vestry should make a new written agreement with each group, spelling out all the new rules and procedures that visitors to our building must follow. The agreement should be signed by the Senior Warden and the Priest-in-Charge and the group's leader(s).
- Part of the agreement with each group should include a proviso that groups must restrict themselves to their assigned areas and that they must clean and sanitize the areas and wipe down the rest rooms after each use.
- Until the pandemic is declared over in Connecticut, outside groups should not bring food or beverages other than water into the building. They should stay away from the kitchen and refrigerator.
- The rules and procedures will be posted prominently.
- If it is found that groups do not abide by the rules, or that they are endangering the health of their members or our parishioners, consequences may include cancellation of the agreement and the expulsion of the group.
- We recommend that the vacant spaces in the West Wing be offered for rent during Phase 3.

The CEC Re-Gathering Task Force:

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APPENDIX A: SEATING PLAN

The Main 2 Sections of Pews:

First 2 rows of Pews will remain empty.

Every other row will be skipped.

Starting in the third row – each pew will either hold a family unit of 3 or more or a single person or couple family unit. Example:

		xxxx		family unit of 3 or more
	xx	6 feet	xx	2 family units of 2 each
	x	6 feet	x	2 family units of 1 each
	xx	6 feet	x	1 fam unit of 2 and 1

The two outer sections of shorter pews will also start in the third row and hold a single family unit (one, two or more people) and every other row will be skipped.

We suggest that we save the outer shorter pews for those that need to be more isolated from others because of medical conditions and/or have a Doctor's note that they can not wear a mask.

