



The Diocese of Fond du Lac

The Episcopal Church in northeast Wisconsin

BACK TO THE BUILDINGS

A set of guidelines approved by the Bishop of Fond du Lac and the Covid-19 Task Force

Released June 1, 2020

*It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.
Do not fear or be dismayed. – Deuteronomy 31:8*

*Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”
Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me. – John 14:5-6*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Following this introduction are the directives for congregations in the Diocese of Fond du Lac eventually to return to using their church buildings. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced us to change our familiar ways of doing and being God’s Church. We have suspended in-person public worship. We have had to abstain from Holy Eucharist. It has been hard and disorienting. But it is important to note that while we have not been gathering at our church buildings, we have not ceased to be the Church. In spite of the constraints imposed upon us by the pandemic; we have found creative, faithful ways to worship and pray and connect with one another and to serve and to bear witness. Important lessons have been learned. Everyone, clergy and lay, is to be commended for your tremendous efforts to minister to each other in this difficult time.

For all that, we are eager to return to our church buildings to worship God together. The diocesan Covid-19 Task Force (comprising medical professionals, laypersons, and clergy from the diocese) and I have been meeting together (virtually) since mid-March to gather reliable data and recommend policies and procedures in response to the pandemic. Our goal has been to establish guidelines for our churches that are medically safe, theologically sound, and pastorally attentive. Discerning how to balance those objectives has not always be straightforward, and your patience and cooperation have been much appreciated.

We are now looking forward to what it will look for us to return to our church buildings. While more and more businesses are opening, we will be going slower. This is partly due to our desire to be careful particularly for the sake of our more vulnerable members.

But it is also our understanding from public health experts that increased length of time shared in the same space leads to greater potential risk. That makes worshipping in groups somewhat more risky than, say, quick trips to the grocery store. So, we are setting our own framework for returning to shared space, independent of what other businesses are doing or what various politicians are saying. We are confident that our plan will enable us to worship safely when we eventually return to our buildings once the infection rate declines.

As followers of Jesus, we base our decisions regarding how to resume in-person worship not on fear but care—care for one another. The second greatest commandment, according to our Lord's summary of the Law, is that we love our neighbors; and indeed, Jesus takes us even further in giving us a new commandment: that we love one another in the same way that he has loved us. It's love that needs to drive our policy-making—love for each other and for our neighbors, love that sacrifices our own desires and comfort in service to others.

Our return to in-person worship will occur in stages, moving from more restrictions to fewer as it becomes safe to do so based on infection rates and other public health factors. But the course of the virus is uneven from place to place and from time to time. If the number of cases increases, we will have to return to stricter protocols. It may feel like going backwards at times. We should prepare for that possibility.

Even when we begin returning to our buildings, we will have to forego for some time many things we love about being church: singing, hugging, hand-shaking, fellowship at coffee hour, etc., are still very effective ways to spread the virus. We will be expecting the wearing of masks and physical distancing, the combination of which reduce the risk. So, what we come back to will not be what we are used to—not for a while. However strange it feels, though, it will still be meet and right to gather and worship, even if that worship is restricted in form and function.

We also need to remember that not everybody will feel safe returning to in-person worship right away. Others will choose not to attend due to some of the constraints like mask wearing. That is OK. We all (lay persons and clergy) have to make prudent decisions to protect our own health and sense of safety. It is perfectly fine to continue sheltering in place, praying at home, and participating in worship online. Those who can gather for worship will do so on behalf of—and in fellowship with—those who are unable to do so.

The immediate future will continue to be strange and difficult. But gathering to lift our hearts up to God is what the Church does. During this time, we've had to adapt and grow. Hopefully, we will carry these lessons forward even when we are able to return to

our more familiar in-person worship, continuing the new ministries we have begun alongside our more familiar aspects of church life. We know from John, chapter 14, that Jesus is with us, and that he goes to prepare a way for us, even now. May the Holy Spirit grant us a sense of patience, forbearance, and hope as we seek to follow Jesus in the Way that leads to life everlasting.

The Rt. Rev. Matthew A. Gunter
Bishop of Fond du Lac
on behalf of the Covid-19 Task Force

INTRODUCTION

This Back to the Buildings document is the first to be developed to provide direction to congregations and ministries of the Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac as they continue to adjust to life under the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than attempt to apply strict orders, the Task Force determined to provide specific guidelines with recommended best practices. This broader approach reflects that the pandemic's impact on life in Marinette or Minocqua may not be the same as in Menasha or Manitowoc.

However, there are places when the Task Force is more directive and presents protocols which are necessary and vital as reflected by the strength of the language. For example, "Churches already offering services on-line should continue to do so for those who continue to worship at home" is more permissive. "All participants entering the church building are required to wear masks and use hand sanitizer while in the building" is more directive.

If there are questions or clarifications needed as the document is reviewed, please contact the Diocesan Office at (920) 830-8866 or diofdl@diofdl.org. Someone there may be able to answer your questions, provide clarification, or direct you to a member of the Task Force who may be able to provide that information.

MEDICAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

In crafting the guidelines of Back to the Buildings, the Covid-19 Task Force (members listed at end) has relied upon the many guidelines issued by federal and state public health agencies and national and state church leaders of various denominations, as well as the medical knowledge and experience of its members. The following criteria and "benchmarks" have been taken into account in advising the Bishop on the safety measures to employ for the congregations of the diocese and timing of a reopening plan:

- 1) a consistent, downward trend in the reports of COVID or flu like illnesses,
- 2) the trends in positive COVID tests,
- 3) degree of prevalence of COVID among health care workers, and
- 4) level of hospital capacity.

These criteria are universally recognized as being based upon sound medical practices and are used as measures of community safety.

While the statewide Safer at Home public health mandate is no longer in force, there is no *medical* resolution to the Covid-19 pandemic in immediate sight. As communities in Wisconsin transition to more frequent and larger gatherings in public places, and as fewer venues maintain social distancing and other safety measures, we may see an increase in Covid-19 related illness in the near future.

This Task Force continues to monitor these indicators and ongoing recommendations from federal and state public health agencies to guide us as we move forward toward gathering in-person on a more regular basis. Political considerations have not guided our deliberations, except to the extent we recognize our obligations to be no less restrictive than legal requirements in place.

In addition to the decision about *when* to reopen our church buildings, the Task Force is also developing additional policies and safe practices about *how* to do so. In this effort we are guided by the same medical criteria, bearing in mind that as Christians, our duty is to both practice and model care and concern for *the other*—how best to keep our neighbor safe—as we reenter in-person fellowship.

GUIDELINES FOR SAFE RETURN TO CHURCH BUILDINGS

Each rector, vicar, priest-in-charge, or wardens when there is no such cleric, in consultation with the vestry, shall determine when it is appropriate to return to holding church services in-person under the following guidelines, taking into account the risk in the local community as well as the demographics and risk factors of the members of the congregation. Because the spread of the Covid-19 virus will vary over time and regions of the state, changing conditions may require practices to change at the congregation level for the foreseeable future. Any resumption of in-building services must follow these practices.

GENERAL PRACTICES

- ◆ **GATHERING SIZE**– no more than 10 persons, including priest, servers or worship leaders. Congregations may offer additional services at different times to accommodate additional worshippers, provided additional practices (i.e. cleaning) are followed.
- ◆ **DISTANCE**– Participants must maintain a minimum of 6 feet between people not living in the same household.
- ◆ **HOUSEHOLD**– No more than one household or family unit should share a pew.
- ◆ **ENTERING/MASKS/SANITIZER**– All participants entering the church building are required to wear masks and use hand sanitizer while in the building to reduce risk of transmission to others. Churches should attempt to supply disposable masks, if available, for those attending. At a minimum, a small supply of masks should be kept on hand for those who arrive without one. Attendees should be reminded to launder homemade masks after use. Persons with health conditions which preclude wearing of masks or young children unable to wear masks and abide by social distancing requirements should continue to worship from home for the time being.
- ◆ **CLERGY**– Clergy shall wear masks any time their work in the church buildings will involve contact with, or the presence of, other persons. (*see Liturgics section below*)
- ◆ **COFFEE HOUR**– No coffee hour or other social gathering is to be held.
- ◆ **ON-LINE WORSHIP**– Churches already offering services on-line should continue to do so for those who continue to worship at home. Churches without the resources to offer services on-line are encouraged to share in on-line worship with those congregations that offer it. Encourage high-risk individuals to attend worship virtually rather than in-person.
- ◆ **CLEANING**– Following each use of the church building, commonly touched surfaces, such as doorknobs, railings, etc. shall be disinfected as soon as possible. The space used for worship should not be used again until disinfecting of such surfaces has taken place.
- ◆ **SHARED ITEMS**– Care should be taken to reduce use of shared items, such as prayer books. Participants are to be encouraged to “adopt one” and take it home and bring for personal use each week. A church may use paper disposable orders of service which are to be disposed of after a single use.
- ◆ **VENTILATION**– Attention needs be paid to improving ventilation by opening windows or doors to admit outside/fresh air (as opposed to running recycled air systems).
- ◆ **DOOR PROPPING**– Whenever possible, prop doors open to avoid extensive physical touching of handles. Handles and other door surfaces are to be disinfected following services.
- ◆ **TRAFFIC FLOW**– Whenever feasible, participant movement and traffic flow should be in one direction. Signs and verbal directions should be given to create one-way traffic flow.
- ◆ **RECORD KEEPING**– Designate a person to keep a written record of names of those in attendance at every service for follow up in case of illness. Taking a photo of those attending, with date clearly visible, will document proximity to others and assist in identification should follow-up be needed.¹ Records will be destroyed according to the Records Retention Schedule of the Episcopal Church.

¹ This may be done by having the designated person sitting near the entrance as people arrive. If someone enters they do not know, they may ask that person’s name, explaining it as a safety precaution. At a given point of time in the service, perhaps at the announcements, the person will want to take a photo from the front of the church, and may need to take one from each side to capture all faces.

- ◆ **OFFICE**– Church office functions are to be limited to essential operations. Any persons in the office are to wear masks. If more than one person uses the office, its surfaces (including the phone, computer equipment, and writing utensils), are regularly sanitized.
- ◆ **BUILDING USE**– Consider allowing non-church building users/renters (music lessons, etc.) to resume use if they are able to observe gathering limits and distancing protocols and the church is able to accommodate cleaning needs. These users must maintain a written record of those who attend any event in church buildings and be prepared to share it with the church leadership or public health officials as needed for follow up in case of illness.
- ◆ **MEETINGS**– Vestry and other church groups of fewer than 10 may meet in-person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing. Continuing to meet online is preferred.
- ◆ **ENCOURAGING SAFE PRACTICE**
 - High risk individuals, including the elderly or those with underlying chronic medical conditions, are encouraged to attend on-line services rather than in-person services.
 - Anyone feeling ill, who is experiencing any symptoms of illness, or who has been exposed to someone with a confirmed case of Covid-19 is to refrain from attending public church services.
- ◆ **SYMPTOMATIC**– Any person who attends an in-person church function is required to contact the church if they or an immediate family member falls ill or experiences symptoms within 14 days of having attended a public church event. This announcement should be made at in-person gatherings.
- ◆ **OUTDOORS**– During seasonable weather, outside gatherings may be a safer alternative to building use. In the event such events are planned, all safety measures described in this policy including gathering size, mask use and social distancing guidelines must still be enforced.
- ◆ **OFFERING/COUNTING**–Offerings should be encouraged electronically or by check if possible. Cash received at services should be placed in a locked storage area for at least four days before counting. Counters should wear masks when handling money.
- ◆ **WATER**– receptacles for Holy Water in church buildings should be left empty.
- ◆ **TOUCHABLE SURFACES**—Clergy and lay leaders should perform a walk through the church building and physical plant, looking for and removing items or closing areas where the common touching of items could increase risk of disease transmission.

LITURGICAL PRACTICES

Note: these practices are applicable to both indoor and outdoor services.

- ◆ **MUSIC**– Because a virus is most readily spread through droplets, there should be no singing or use of wind instruments. Live, non-wind instrumental music or recordings are encouraged.
- ◆ **DISTANCE**– Servers and Celebrant must maintain adequate social distance (at least six feet). The number of persons in the sanctuary serving in the altar area is to be kept to a minimum.
- ◆ **MASK USE**- Everyone, including the celebrant and preacher shall wear masks throughout the service. Masks may be removed only for the receiving of Communion, after which they are to be put on again and hands sanitized. Preaching, Readings and Intercessions must be performed from locations that maximize safe distance from the congregation.
- ◆ **HAND-WASHING**– Servers and Celebrant must wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before the service and use hand sanitizer at the altar - particularly before handling Eucharistic vessels.

- ◆ **ELEMENTS**– Only commercially prepared and packaged communion wafers should be used for communion. Place wafers directly from packaging into the cleaned receptacle for consecration to avoid touching them. During the service and through the consecration, the hosts are to be covered by a strong cloth sufficient to protect them from contamination during the consecration. Gluten free hosts should be separately protected and distributed.
- ◆ **KIND**– Both bread and wine are to be consecrated. Only the Celebrant (or a designates minister if the Celebrant cannot) will consume the wine. Consecrated hosts are to be placed separately and individually on a large paten or clean tray to enable each communicant to take a single host without touching others on the tray. None of wine is to reserved.
- ◆ **APPROACH**– Those communing are to approach from their seats one at a time, maintaining physical distancing, to retrieve the host. Hand sanitizer stations must be placed so the communicant will sanitize immediately before receiving the host and immediately after consuming.
- ◆ **CONTACT**– No contact options should replace physical touching, including during the Peace, passing of an offertory plate or other parts of the service involving physical contact.

LIFE RITUALS

(WEDDINGS, FUNERALS, BAPTISMS)

The General and Liturgical Practices above are to be followed, but this section highlights those guidelines directly related to life rituals. Outdoor life ritual services are subject to the same practices as indoor services.

- ◆ **PARTICIPANTS**– Services for weddings, funerals and baptisms should be limited to no more than 10 persons, including the priest, servers or worship leaders. Participants must maintain six feet of social distancing while on church property.
- ◆ **FUNERALS**– Many funeral homes now offer safe practices to enable groups larger than 10 to attend. Clergy are to encourage use of funeral homes for potentially larger funeral gatherings.
- ◆ **PRACTICES**– All participants entering the church building are required to wear masks and use hand sanitizer while in the building to reduce risk of transmission to others. Supply disposable masks, if available, for those attending. At a minimum, a small supply of masks should be kept on hand for those who arrive without one. Attendees should be reminded to launder homemade masks after use.
- ◆ **OUTDOOR**– During seasonable weather, outside gatherings may be a safer alternative to building use, provided mask use and social distancing guidelines are still enforced to reduce the risk of transmission. Outdoor rituals are encouraged where feasible and appropriate.
- ◆ **GATHERING**– No social or fellowship time on church property shall be held after life ritual events.
- ◆ **MUSIC**– Because a virus is most readily spread through droplets, there should be no singing or use of wind instruments. Live, non-wind instrumental music or recordings are encouraged.
- ◆ **RECORD KEEPING**– A record of names of those in attendance must be kept for follow up in case of illness.
- ◆ **ATTENDANCE**– Anyone feeling ill, who is experiencing any symptoms of illness, or who has been exposed to someone with a confirmed case of Covid-19 is to refrain from attending.
- ◆ **SYMPTOMATIC**– Any person who attends is required to contact the church if they or an immediate family member falls ill or is symptomatic within 14 days of having attended. This announcement should be made at the event.

PASTORAL VISITS AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- ◆ *PASTORAL CONTACT*– Clergy and lay leaders are encouraged to speak with individual high risk parishioners and encourage them to continue to shelter safely at home and be prepared to provide pastoral support for any grief caused by not being able to return in-person to services.
- ◆ *COMMUNITY GUIDELINES*– Clergy and lay leaders are to follow guidelines set by their local communities (e.g. hospitals, assisted living facilities, nursing homes) as to the possibility and protocol of clergy visits with patients and residents.
- ◆ *HOME VISITS*– To reduce risk of infection, there should be no visits inside a person’s home. Outside or driveway visits, phone visits, online video visits or other feasible means of providing pastoral support without direct physical contact are encouraged.
- ◆ *MASKS*– Masks are to be worn by any cleric or lay person making pastoral visits to reduce risk of transmission to others, whether inside or outside.

LOOKING AHEAD

The timeline by which we are able to move forward, as individual congregations and as a diocese, into phases of returning to our church buildings and engaging in larger group gatherings depends on many factors, many beyond our control. For example, we are beginning this stage with a limitation of 10 persons gathered at one time. We hope that as time goes by and conditions improve, that number will increase or become based on the amount of worship space available. Most notably, changing public health conditions in each of our communities as well the state of the virus and other safety measures must be taken into account. As we move forward, we hope to be able to increase the size of our in-person gatherings, return to beloved church-led community events, and to allow more of our familiar aspects of worship, such as congregant music or more personal communion distribution. These transitions will take time and will be conditional, based upon each worship community’s circumstances as well as local and state public health developments.

We keep in our minds that as people of God, our primary concern is for love of God and of our neighbors, who need our care and witness as we move forward as communities. Our future actions will continue to work for the mission of the Church—inside our buildings, outside of our doors, through social media, and by virtual worship opportunities, to reach those who cannot make it through our doors. We embrace this future with faith, hope and excitement for what God holds for us.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCE

A variety of resources to assist in this time of transition, including links to governmental and other sources of information, may be found at diofdl.org/covid-resources. Additional material of interest may also be found at diofdl.org/clergy. A Covid-19 resource page is available on virtually every municipality website. Please take the time to discover this for your county and/or city, village or town website.

TASK FORCE

The Bishop of the Diocese of Fond du Lac appointed a Task Force shortly after the state of emergency developed to assist in providing direction to the diocese and its congregations. The Covid-19 Task Force has met regularly. By tracking the recommendations from public health experts, monitoring the response from fellow communities of faith, and soliciting ideas and expertise from others in our diocese, it is able to provide the direction to the diocese. Members of the task force are:

- The Rev. Chris Arnold, Rector, Trinity, Oshkosh, Chair
- The Rev. Monica Burkert-Brist, Vicar, Holy Trinity Church, Waupun, former Assistant Attorney General, Wisconsin Dept of Justice
- Mrs. Nicci Beeck, Grace, Sheboygan, for 18 years, public health educator for the Brown County Health Department
- Dr. Pamela Glennon, St. John's, Wausau, Orthopedic Surgeon
- The Rev. Sue Kruger, St. John's, Wausau, Hospital Chaplain and Educator
- Dr. Brad Lauderdale, M.D., St. Thomas, Menasha, Critical Care and Pulmonary Medicine
- The Rev. Amanda Sampey, St. James, Mosinee and Chaplain at Ascension Hospital, Wausau and St. Michael's, Stevens Point
- The Rev. Christopher Wilkerson, Rector, All Saints, Appleton