



EPISCOPAL DIOCESE of INDIANAPOLIS

May 11, 2020

Dear Ones:

I am so grateful for your leadership in the trying months that we have been out of our church buildings. I often refer to our congregations, scattered about central and southern Indiana as aid stations of hope and healing, and that description and mission has never been more true than it is now. It is time for us to begin careful consideration of when we should resume worshipping in our church buildings, and what conditions must be met before we proceed.

In this document, you will find a set of questions and recommendations that will help you develop a plan for reopening your churches for in-person worship, a plan I must approve before in-person worship begins.

You may be aware that Governor Holcomb has provided a calendar for opening up elements of economic and civic life in Indiana. But our task is not the same as his, and so we will proceed in a different way. Rather than rely on the date-specific timetable, I will base my decisions about reopening on certain county-level public health metrics (enumerated in the document), and on each congregation's ability to meet a set of standards that will ensure we are conducting in-person worship as safely as possible.

We will, under no circumstances, convene in-person gatherings in communities where they are prohibited for public health reasons, but we can resume weeks or even months later than the state permits if that is what is necessary to keep our people safe.

I hope the resources presented here will help us make our way back to in-person gathering with care for each congregation's specific context and awareness of public health situations in counties across Indiana. We will update the recommendations and standards frequently as conditions evolve. My staff and I are here at every turn to support you as you assess the situation in your community and how your congregation is called to respond.

Even though we may return to our buildings at different times and in different ways, know that all of us in the Diocese of Indianapolis are bound to one another, and what is happening in one part of our diocese matters to every other part. As we work our way through the process of reopening, know that my highest priority is that we are guided by our mission commitments to be connected to one another and to care for the vulnerable and marginalized among us. Our call to be beacons of Christ is not diminished.

Especially now, I am grateful for your faithful witness. Thank you for your ministry in these extraordinary times.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jennifer Bookwala Branson".

Bishop Jennifer

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This document incorporates elements of discussions between Bishop Jennifer and lay and clergy leaders from across the diocese, diocesan staff meetings, conversations between the bishop and the Executive Council, the Standing Committee, and the Diocese of Northern Indiana. Additionally, it includes counsel from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Johns Hopkins University, the Church Insurance Company, the House of Bishops, and Episcopal Relief & Development. We are indebted to the dioceses of Maine, Georgia and San Diego, and the Wisconsin Council of Churches for their generosity in helping us shape this document.

Live Streaming and Recording Worship from Church Buildings: Permissible Beginning May 24

A group of no more than 10 individuals may return to churches beginning on May 24 solely for the purpose of livestreaming or recording worship. Clergy and lay people aged 65 and older or who have underlying medical conditions that put them at greater risk from the virus must stay home. In addition, these live-streamed or recorded sessions must conform to the safety requirements outlined under “Building Use” on page 4 and “Worship and Fellowship” on page 6 of this document.

No congregation is required to return to its church building to livestream or record worship. You have the bishop’s full support if you judge that continuing to stream or record from home is the best choice for your congregation.

Assembling for In-Person Public Worship: Permissible Beginning June 14

PUBLIC HEALTH STANDARDS

Your church may return to public in-person worship when:

- The number of COVID-19 cases in your county has decreased for 14 days. Find this information on the Indiana COVID-19 dashboard website (<https://www.coronavirus.in.gov/2393.htm>), and verify it by calling your county’s health department.
- Your county retains the ability to test all Hoosiers who are COVID-19 symptomatic.
- Health officials in your county have systems in place to contact all individuals who test positive for COVID-19 and complete contact tracing.

Unless all three of these criteria are met, return to public worship will be delayed. For example, if there has not been a decline in diagnosed cases of COVID-19 in your county for 14 days by June 14, you may not return to public worship on that date. Each congregation’s reopening team, described below, is responsible for monitoring its congregation’s local situation.



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CONGREGATIONAL REGATHERING TEAMS

Each congregation must establish a congregational regathering team composed of clergy and lay leaders whose tasks are the following:

- Develop a regathering plan for approval by Bishop Jennifer
- Monitor local public health conditions
- Remain in contact with bishop's staff as you monitor local outbreak conditions. Regathering teams need not inform the bishop's office of every decision they make as long as they are following their regathering plan. However, if conditions necessitate returning to worship from home, please let the bishop's office know.

REGATHERING PLAN REQUIRED

If your county has met the public health standards above and your congregation's regathering plan has been approved by the bishop, you may be permitted to hold gatherings of up to 25 people. Such plans must conform to the standards outlined below. The earliest permissible date to return for in-person public worship is June 14. At this time, we do not have a projected date for granting approval for gatherings of more than 25 people.

No congregation is required to return to its church building for in-person public worship. You have the bishop's full support if you judge that continuing to stream or record from home or from your church building is the best choice for your congregation.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT REOPENING YOUR CHURCH

In order to reopen for in-person worship, every congregation must create a Congregational Regathering Plan that incorporates provisions for good hygiene, cleaning and sanitizing procedures, physical distancing and other best practices. The complexity of the plan will depend on the size and configuration of your building. It need not be more elaborate than necessary. Before you begin your planning, however, we want you to consider one question: How confident are your clergy and lay leaders about returning to in-person worship? Please do not feel pressured to push ahead. Take the time necessary to feel comfortable with the process of reopening.

GUIDELINES FOR GATHERING

Resuming in-person worship during a pandemic raises a myriad of issues, some obvious and some not. Below you will find questions and recommendations to help guide your thinking, along with standards that must be met before the bishop will approve a reopening plan.

Canon Brendan O'Sullivan Hale (brendan@indydio.org), Canon Kristin White (white@indydio.org) and Transition Minister Jen Phelps (phelps@indydio.org) are prepared to support you through this challenging time. If you have questions or need clarification on any of the points found here, please contact them.



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BUILDING USE

Before anyone can gather, your church must be ready to receive them. Building users besides the congregation, such as recovery groups, must be provided with a copy of this document and agree to adhere to its standards. Each congregation will need to assess its ability to respond appropriately if an outbreak is associated with a building user.

Here are questions you will need to answer, provisions you will need to make, and recommendations that may be of help in preparing your building for worship and others uses.

Questions

How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection of your physical plant including pews, doorknobs, light switches, restrooms, and other areas that people touch when they are in your building?

How will you sanitize prayer books and hymnals and provide for the distribution and disposal of worship bulletins?

Do you need to make provisions for small group gathering spaces?

Do you need to make provisions to disinfect and/or restrict the use of nurseries or playgrounds?

If you hold multiple services, how will you ensure proper social distancing between those leaving the church and those arriving?

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How will you communicate your safety standards and procedures to people both before they enter the building and while they are present at a service or meeting?

How will you properly dispose of biohazard waste, including used masks?

Recommendations

Explore the possibility of limiting or entirely avoiding the distribution of printed worship materials. Consider publishing the worship bulletin online or via email, so that people can print it at home or use it on their mobile devices.

Consider removing prayer books, hymnals and Bibles from the pews.

Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home and seek medical attention if they have symptoms.

Continue to allow staff members who use the church office to work from home as much as possible.

Consider limiting the number of people who use the church office and discouraging visitors. Require everyone present to wear a mask. Ensure that high-touch surfaces are regularly sanitized.

Standards

You must drain and sanitize all holy water stoops and baptismal fonts.

You must maintain sufficient amounts of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels.

You must clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces like light switches, pews, doorknobs, restrooms, etc.

You must have a clearly articulated plan to communicate your safety standards and practices to the congregation.

WORSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP

We have been worshipping online for almost two months. The change from online worship to in-person worship will not happen all at once, and not everyone now worshipping online will feel comfortable coming to church right away. The spiritual needs of the congregants who prefer to continue worshipping online must still be met. Additionally, due to restrictions on the size of public gatherings, many churches will need to manage attendance to remain within the law. This may require both registration and additional services.

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Questions

If you choose to return to your buildings while those over 65 and those with underlying medical conditions are being advised to stay home, how will you provide for them and for others who do not feel safe attending church?

How will you respond to people in high risk categories who nonetheless want to return to in-person worship?

If you return to your church, will you continue to provide an online service? Online coffee hour? Online small groups?

How will you limit attendance at gatherings so there is room for visitors and newcomers to take part without exceeding the guideline maximum?

How will you coordinate logistics like reservations in order to make that happen?

Everyone present in church gatherings must wear masks. How will you provide masks for people who forget? How will you attend to someone who doesn't want to wear a mask?

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Will you screen people who attend gatherings? How will you respond if someone appears ill?

What degree of exposure to someone with COVID-19 would preclude someone from gathering? (Someone in their household? In the workspace? A neighbor they pass on the street?)

How will you communicate seating arrangements that ensure social distancing?

Recommendations

If you cannot continue to provide an online worship and fellowship opportunity for those who cannot yet attend church due to the pandemic, you should reconsider the decision to reenter your building.

People over age 65 and those with underlying medical conditions, whether volunteers, parishioners, or program participants, should refrain from attending in-person worship or meetings.

Staff members over age 65 who cannot work from home may return to work if the nature of their work and work space allows them to practice proper social distancing.

Outdoor services are preferred over indoor services, assuming all necessary precautions can be taken. Sunlight and increased air circulation have a protective effect.

Consider using an online church management system, such as Realm, or a free online event service such as Eventbrite to take reservations for worship to ensure you do not exceed capacity.

Determine an alternative to passing the offertory plates. Provide a stationary and central offering basket. Encourage and make provisions for online giving (available through the diocese at no cost to congregations: onrealm.org/indydio/-/give/covid19)

Governance and program committees of fewer than 10 people may consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing but may also continue to meet online.

Consider gathering contact information from all worship and meeting attendees. Recording names will enable the Health Department to more quickly trace, test and quarantine people who may have been exposed to COVID-19 if an attendee is later found to have had the virus at the time they were present. Advance registration for services will ease the process of collecting contact information.

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Standards

Everyone at church gatherings must wear masks.

Until the risks of singing and playing wind instruments are better understood as a means of transmission, singing and the use of wind instruments in services are not permitted. This includes choral singing, congregational singing, singing by cantors and soloists and chanting by the presider. Consider how to make use of other instruments, recordings, and artistic offerings to God.

Social distance of 6 feet or more must be observed in seating arrangements.

Physical contact is not permitted at the peace.

No offering basket or plate may be passed.

Greeters must not make physical contact at the entrance of the church by welcoming people with a handshake or a hug.

In-person coffee hours are prohibited until further notice.

A WORD ON THE EUCHARIST

The diocese strongly recommends that congregations use the rites for Morning Prayer, Ante-Communion or Spiritual Communion rather than offering the Holy Eucharist when we first return to our churches. If a church feels compelled to hold a Eucharist, safe food preparation protocols must be observed. This means masks and gloves must be worn by the presider and any communion ministers. Communicants will receive only the consecrated bread, and must do so standing, as able. The use of the communion rail is suspended. Communicants and ministers must both use hand sanitizer before and after reception of communion.

WEDDINGS AND FUNERALS

Weddings and funerals can occur while adhering to the guidelines provided in this document. Baptisms are not permitted until further notice.

FEEDING MINISTRIES

Ministries responding to food insecurity or medical support may continue using physical distancing guidelines and other practices suitable for the particular ministry. Requirements for group size, physical distancing, sanitation and use of masks must be followed.

We advise that distribution ministries limit time spent inside the building and allow for outside or curbside service.

Any food distribution must be to-go or served by a person using gloves. Buffets are prohibited.



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VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL AND MISSION TRIPS

We recommend that you not offer in-person summer programming, including Vacation Bible Schools and mission trips. Not only has it become clear the virus poses a clear risk to children, but children involved in group activities may also infect more vulnerable family members. We advise that congregations consider providing an online or no-touch drop off at-home activities.

Notes