

COVID-19 Communities of Worship Guidance

COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services

This document provides guidance for places of worship and providers of religious services to support the safest possible environment for faith leaders, employees, volunteers, scholars, and all other types of workers, as well as congregants, worshippers, and visitors.

This guidance does not require or encourage places of worship to resume in-person activity. It is strongly recommended that places of worship continue to facilitate remote services, particularly for those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 including older adults, immune-compromised individuals, and those with other underlying conditions. Even with proper physical distancing, multiple different households convening in a congregational setting to worship carries a higher risk for widespread transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19, and may result in increased rates of infection, hospitalization, and death, especially among more vulnerable populations. In particular, the high risk associated with activities such as singing and group recitation can negate the risk-reducing behaviors such as six feet of physical distancing.

The Safest Options: Remote Services and Drive-In Services

A common thread joining many faiths is a deep respect for human life and health, which prioritizes protecting our neighbors and the vulnerable among us. Places of worship may choose to express those values by practicing the safest forms of worship through remote services and drive-in services.

Remote Services:

- Remote services can be streamed online, broadcast by radio, and/or conducted by telephone or dial-in. Remote services are the only way to guarantee that places of worship will not become sources of new infection.

Drive-In Services:

- Drive-in services involve congregants driving to a common location and worshipping together from their household vehicle, while listening to either a remote service or one that is broadcast through speakers. If done correctly, these types of services pose a low risk of infection. **Some best practices include:**
 - Congregants remain in their vehicles at all times.
 - Congregants who are living together travel together, without introducing new people to the vehicle.
 - Maintain distance between cars so that there is more than six feet of distance between any group of congregants and another group of congregants – particularly if car windows are open.
 - Restrooms should be regularly sanitized and have sufficient soap and hand sanitizer.

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Relatively Safer Options for In-Person Worship

Faith communities also cherish fellowship. The desire for the human connection of worshipping together, particularly during a time of crisis, is understandable. However, gatherings of any size pose a risk of COVID-19 transmission. For places of worship that choose to hold in-person activities, the safest course of action is to congregate outdoors and/or in small groups of less than 10 people:

Congregate Outdoors

- Where weather and facilities permit, it is much safer for worship and other activity to occur outdoors rather than indoors. **Some best practices include:**
 - Congregants who are living together should sit together, at least six feet apart from other congregants and groups.
 - Wear face coverings.
 - Refrain from singing and group recitation, especially when not wearing a face covering, which significantly increases the risk of transmission of the virus by projecting respiratory droplets. Consider pre-recorded music or other alternatives. If continuing with singing and group recitation, increase social distance to at least 10 feet between groups and ensure face coverings are worn.
 - Restrooms should be regularly sanitized and have sufficient soap and hand sanitizer.
 - Follow applicable guidance below for in-person activities.

Congregate in Groups of Less Than 10 People Indoors

- For in-person services that are indoors, the safest choice is to limit the number of people during a given service. Consider holding multiple services for multiple small groups, limiting in-person services to special events (weddings, funerals, baptisms, etc.), or limiting in-person activities to private prayer and worship. **Some best practices include:**
 - Congregants who are living together sit together, at least six feet apart from other groups.
 - Wear face coverings.
 - Especially indoors or without face coverings, refrain from singing and group recitation, which significantly increases the risk of transmission of the virus by projecting respiratory droplets. Consider pre-recorded music or other alternatives. If continuing with singing and group recitation, increase social distance to at least 10 feet between groups and ensure face coverings are worn.
 - Restrooms should be regularly sanitized and have sufficient soap and hand sanitizer.
 - Follow applicable guidance below for in-person activities.

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Additional Guidance for In-Person Activities

As places of worship navigate COVID-19, the guidelines below are designed to make in-person indoor worship and activities safer – **recognizing that the safest and recommended options are those listed above**, and that larger gatherings pose greater risk. Strict social distancing, wearing face coverings, and cleaning and disinfecting are paramount to reducing the risk of infection for in-person gatherings.

Places of worship should develop a COVID-19 plan and be prepared to adapt to updated public health guidance and to restrict in-person activities if the incidence of COVID-19 within their communities increases. Places of worship should provide training to both staff and congregants on their COVID-19 plans and should share the new safety protocols and processes by email, video, mail, and posted signage – with frequent updates as new safety protocols are implemented.

Capacity Limits

- The larger gatherings grow in size, the greater the risk they will become a sources of COVID-19 transmission. Ohio's current Public Health Orders limit gatherings of no more than 10 people for most activities, and recommend smaller, household centered groupings places of worship, weddings, and funerals. Where the 10-person limit cannot be followed in places of worship, **these guidelines are recommended:**
 - Set a capacity limit for the place of worship that allows for extensive social distancing (six feet or more) between congregants.
 - Expand capacity limits gradually, rather than all at once, to allow the opportunity to test and improve safety protocols.
 - Conduct multiple small services as opposed to one large service.
 - **Consider small, separate services for vulnerable groups** – such as those such as those over 65 years or immune-compromised, or those with small children who will have difficulty social distancing. During services for those over 65 or vulnerable, enforce strict safety protocols.
 - Develop and communicate a social distancing plan that includes where congregants will sit, how they will enter and exit seating areas (including staggered and scheduled arrival times and staggered exit times), and how social distancing can be maintained at all times given the physical layout of the place of worship. Use the social distancing plan to determine a safe capacity limit.

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Individual Control Measures & Screening

- Post signage and physical indicators (e.g., tape, runners, ropes, ribbons) at entrances and throughout the building in strategic and highly visible locations. **Signage should include:**
 - Asking congregants not to enter if they have a cough, high fever, shortness of breath, or if they have been exposed to anyone who has tested positive with COVID-19 in the past fourteen (14) days.
 - Asking congregants to wear face coverings that appropriately cover the nose, mouth, and chin while inside your place of worship.
 - Reminding congregants to keep proper social distance from individuals from other households and to avoid hand-shaking, hugging, or kissing.
 - Proper hand-washing whenever a common/high-traffic surface is touched, or after touching the face, especially eyes, nose, and mouth.
 - Mark walking paths between spaces designated for congregants/visitors to sit/kneel so that people do not walk where someone may be touching the floor.
- It is **strongly recommend** to keep a log or to register congregants attending in person services to aid contact tracing if a congregant or staff member does become ill with COVID-19.
- Encourage staff and congregants/visitors who are sick or exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19, or who have family members who are ill, to stay home. Screen congregants for temperature or symptoms upon arrival as applicable.
- Use social media, website, texts, email, newsletters, etc., to communicate the steps being taken to protect congregants/visitors and staff so that they are familiar with the policies (including to stay home if experiencing symptoms or at an increased risk of becoming sick, face coverings, physical distancing, handwashing and/or sanitizing, and cough etiquette), before arriving at the facility. Staff and volunteers are strongly encouraged to remind congregants/visitors of these practices with announcements during services or on welcoming guests.
- Consider reaching out separately to those who are ill but desire to be engaged in worship services; make a plan to include those participants by phone, video, or a safe alternative.
- Monitor for staff illnesses, and have staff remain home if they are ill or have been exposed to a person who is ill.
- Know and communicate where staff and congregants can get tested for COVID- 19 if they develop symptoms (www.lucascountyhealth.com/coronavirusupdates **Community Testing Tab**).
- Recruit non-vulnerable volunteers to assist in all activities and particularly in those that may require close contact.
- Limit offerings of classes or services for school-aged children to small groups (9 children or less) and devise an age-appropriate plan for children to practice social distancing and wear face coverings.

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Avoid the Riskiest Activities

COVID-19 spreads primarily through respiratory droplets in person-to-person contact (within 6 feet); risk grows as exposure time increases. Some activities at places of worship pose a heightened risk that should be avoided:

Singing and Group Recitation

- Strongly consider discontinuing singing (and post signage discouraging singing), group recitation, and other practices and performances where there is increased likelihood for transmission from contaminated exhaled droplets. Modify such practices by calling for silent recitation, using prerecorded music, or having a single singer in a separate area with speaker transmission. If these practices cannot be discontinued, strictly limit the number people reciting or singing, ensure physical distancing significantly greater than six feet between people, consider installing hard plastic barriers between people, do not have the singer directly facing the congregation, or opt to celebrate these practices outside with significant physical distancing and other precautions. Use microphones to discourage loud speaking and provide a hard plastic barrier for the speaker.

Food and Beverages

- Discontinue offering food and beverages. Do not hold potlucks or buffet-style meals or events that increase the risk of cross-contamination. If food and beverages must be served, provide items in single-serve containers (disposable containers whenever possible), and ensure that congregants or others who are living together are seated together, and more than six feet apart from others. Employees or volunteers serving food should wash hands frequently and wear disposable gloves and face coverings.

Greetings and Person-to-Person Contact

- Discourage staff, congregants, and visitors from engaging in handshakes, hugs, and similar greetings that break physical distance. Take measures to remind people to wave or use other greetings.

Modify High-Risk Religious Practices

- Consider modifying practices that are specific to particular faith traditions that might encourage the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., discontinue kissing of ritual objects, discontinue bathing rites, encourage rites to be performed by fewer people, provide pre-packed communion items on chairs prior to service, avoid the use of a common cup, and offer communion in the hand instead of on the tongue).
- Discontinue passing offering plates and similar items that move between people. Use alternative giving options such as secure drop boxes that do not require repeated opening/closing and can be cleaned and disinfected. Consider implementing digital systems that allow congregants/visitors to make touch-free offerings.

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Re-Configuring Places of Worship

- Reconfigure seating and standing areas to maintain physical distancing of six feet or more between congregants/visitors from different households. Consider both limiting seating to alternate rows and assigning seating in advance.
- Shorten services to limit the length of time congregants/visitors spend at facilities whenever possible. This could include limiting speeches and asking congregants/visitors to put on garments at home before arrival.
- Dedicate staff to direct guests immediately to their seats upon entry to places of worship rather than congregating in lobbies or common areas. Consider using ushers to help people find places to sit and stand that are at least six feet apart from other guests/household groups.
- Develop and communicate a plan to welcome and dismiss congregants/visitors from seating areas, altars, podiums, meeting rooms, etc. in an orderly way to maintain physical distancing and minimize crossflow of traffic.
- Encourage congregants/visitors to meet with the same group, particularly when services meet frequently and/or require a certain number of people to be present. This can reduce the spread of transmission by minimizing the number of different individuals who come into close contact with each other.
- Close play areas and discontinue activities and services for children where physical distancing of at least six feet cannot be maintained.
- Avoid assembly line type greetings at the beginning or conclusion of services.
- Ask congregants/visitors to arrive and leave in a single household group to minimize crossflow of people. Consider assigning spaced household arrival times to minimize congregants arriving all at once.
- Prop or hold doors open during peak periods when congregants/visitors are entering and exiting facilities, if possible and in accordance with security and safety protocols.
- Close or restrict common areas, such as break rooms, kitchenettes, foyers, etc. where people are likely to congregate and interact. Consider installing barriers or increase physical distance between tables/seating when continued use of these areas cannot be avoided.
- Close or block off water fountains. If possible, provide bottled water.

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Cleaning and Disinfecting Protocols

- Perform thorough cleaning of high traffic areas such as lobbies, halls, chapels, meeting rooms, offices, libraries, and study areas and areas of ingress and egress including stairways, stairwells, handrails, and elevator controls. Frequently disinfect commonly used surfaces including doorknobs, toilets, handwashing facilities, pulpits and podiums, donation boxes or plates, altars, and pews and seating areas.
- Discourage sharing items used in worship and services (such as prayer books, cushions, prayer rugs, etc.) whenever possible and provide single use or digital copies or ask congregants/visitors to bring personal items instead.
- Where items must be shared, disinfect between uses.
- Disinfect microphones and stands, music stands, instruments and other items on pulpits and podiums between each use.
- Install hand sanitizer dispensers, touchless whenever possible, at entrances and contact areas such as meeting rooms, lobbies, and elevator landings.
- Consider limiting the number of people that use the restroom at one time to allow for physical distancing. Consider placing a towel dispenser near the restroom exit with signage for using a towel to touch the door or having touchless exit.
- During meetings and services, introduce fresh outside air, for example by opening doors/windows (weather permitting) and operating ventilation systems.

For Additional Guidance

Visit the following:

- **Center for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC):**
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
- **Ohio Department of Health:**
 - <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/home>
- **Toledo-Lucas County Health Department:**
 - <https://www.lucascountyhealth.com/coronavirusupdates/>

Guidance adapted and modified from the State of Illinois' *COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services*.