

Going Green: Counties In Last Phase of Reopening

July 29, 2020 in Public Health



Updated July 29, 2020

"Our highest priority is to do no harm"

Our suburban counties entered the Green phase of reopening on Friday, June 26. Philadelphia is now modified green but reporting "High Risk of Community Transmission" as of July 29.

The Green phase is *not* a return to pre-pandemic normals. Organizations must still follow practices for **wearing masks, maintaining physical distancing, and disinfecting** their spaces.

"I remind our churches to follow a slow, cautious and deliberate process while moving toward reopening," said Bishop Patricia A. Davenport.

"Our highest priority is to do no harm" in the process of reopening churches, the bishop said. The synod itself is taking a deliberate approach to resuming work at the office in Mt. Airy, with staff continuing to work remotely as protocols are developed for how to safely share and sanitize the space and equipment, airflow and related issues.

"In this new abnormal, our concerns are for our rostered ministers and members who are vulnerable because of their age and/or underlying conditions," the bishop said. "We want everyone to be safe and show

Christ's love for their vulnerable neighbors as we learn whether our area will see new outbreaks."

The bishop is encouraged by congregations' commitment to online worship and by upcoming experiments with outdoor worship.

Already, as cases continue to climb in much of Pennsylvania, Gov. Wolf [reinstated a mandatory mask order and increased limits on some businesses and gatherings, to a maximum of 25 indoors and 250 outdoors](#). While the new limits [are not being applied to houses of worship](#), there is no reason to believe that indoor worship services are more safe than other indoor gatherings to which the limits apply

Congregations should confirm coverage with their insurance carrier and determine what guidelines the insurance company requires before reopening.

Please also check with your local/county health officials, whose restrictions and guidance may be more strict than the state's. As the city enters the "Green" phase additional restrictions will remain in place (see <https://www.phila.gov/2020-06-18-what-the-green-phase-means-for-philadelphia/> for information.)

Related Information by County:

Bucks

Bucks County Health Department:

- COVID-19 Dashboard: <https://covid19-bucksgis.hub.arcgis.com>
- Updates (scroll to Bucks County News on the Coronavirus (COVID-19) at lower right:
<http://www.buckscounty.org/government/healthservices/HealthDepartment/CoronavirusInfo>

- Bucks guidance for faith based organizations:
<http://buckscounty.org/docs/default-source/hd/guidelinesfaithbasedorganizations-covid19.pdf>

Chester

Chester County Health Department:

- COVID-19 landing page:
<https://www.chesco.org/4376/Coronavirus-COVID-19>

Restore Chester County:

- Chester County guidance:
<https://restorechestercounty.org/Business-Religious.cfm>
- Religious and Faith-based Organizations Overview:
<https://restorechestercounty.org/PDF/Religious-English.pdf>
- Visión General las Organizaciones Religiosas y Basadas en la Fe:
<https://restorechestercounty.org/PDF/Religious-Spanish.pdf>

Delaware

Delaware County Government:

- COVID resources:
<https://www.delcopa.gov/ich/resources/coronavirus.html>

Chamber of Commerce:

- Business
Guidance: <https://www.delcochamber.org/coronavirus.html>

Montgomery

Montgomery County Health:

- COVID data and information: <https://data-montcopa.opendata.arcgis.com/pages/covid-19>
- Reopening Guidance: <https://www.montcopa.org/3524/Reopening-Guidance>

Philadelphia

Philadelphia Department of Health:

- COVID information and status: <https://www.phila.gov/programs/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/>
- Reopening With Care guide: <https://www.phila.gov/guides/reopening-with-care/>
- What the Green Phase Means for Philadelphia: <https://www.phila.gov/2020-06-18-what-the-green-phase-means-for-philadelphia/>
- Reopening guidance: <https://www.phila.gov/guides/safer-at-home/reopening-guidance/>
- Guidelines for Religious Institutions: <https://www.phila.gov/media/20200529131928/Guidelines-for-Religious-Institutions.pdf>
- Directrices para Instituciones Religiosas: <https://www.phila.gov/media/20200609203150/Directrices-para-Instituciones-Religiosas-PDF.pdf>



Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Managing The Risks Of Return

July 13, 2020 in Public Health



City Webinar Covers Legal Aspects of Reopening

In its' ongoing conversation with Philadelphia faith leaders, the Mayor's Office of Public Engagement offered an informative webinar last week discussing legal considerations when preparing to resume in-person worship and programming. ([View video of the webinar and slide deck.](#)) While the

conversation focused on operations within the city, the principles may be useful to leaders across our Synod.

(Disclaimer: Neither this summary nor the webinar itself constitute legal advice or consultation. For specifics in your local context, consult your legal counsel.)

At present, the administration is requesting that churches in the city continue remote rather than in-person worship, noted the Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart, Director for Faith-Based and Interfaith Affairs. The [city's guidance](#) calls for no more than 25 people, including staff/leaders, at any worship service or gathering, along with social distancing and wearing of masks.

Churches should consider the legal and financial implication of reopening, because "during traumatic times many people will want to hold accountable the people responsible" for transmission of COVID-19, Rev. Washington-Leapheart said. As a result, churches must enact proactive responses to

crisis, disruptive, and grief.

There may be an “open season of litigation” if transmission is traced to churches, said Angella N. Middleton, an Associate at the firm of Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr. Middleton offered a general overview of legal issues related to re-opening.

Churches may be sued if someone has belief and some evidence that they contracted the virus there, she said. In Pennsylvania there is currently no immunity from litigation over COVID-19 for houses of worship. An exclusion exists only for healthcare providers who follow applicable guidelines.

While a plaintiff would have to prove that they did contract the virus in the church facility/event and some negligence on the part of the church, the congregation would have to prove that they took all reasonable precautions to prevent spread of the disease.

“The [city guidelines](#) are the gold standard to determine reasonableness,” Middleton said. In addition to limiting gathering size to 25 and the masking and distancing rules, the guidelines currently include no choirs or group singing, avoiding eating and drinking together (which eliminates coffee hour), and avoiding passing items hand to hand or hand to mouth (challenging for both offering and distribution of Holy Communion). The guidelines encourage congregations to provide masks for anyone who enters without them.

If reasonableness is your defense, it may be challenging to say that you have abided by ALL of the guidance, Middleton said.

In Pennsylvania, congregations are required to carry Worker’s Compensation Insurance on employees. While this insurance is intended to prevent claims against employers, negligence on the part of the church could limit coverage and lead to a suit, she said.

Other items noted by Middleton:

- Check whether your insurance has provisions for bodily injury and/or infectious disease. Intentional or reckless disregard of current guidelines could limit coverage.
- Monitor the continually updated guidance from the CDC, state, and your city/county health officials.
- Set clear, written policies and communicate them to your members before re-opening and any time that the policies change.
- Document the steps you take to implement your policies.
- It is recommended that churches keep attendance records and have people sign up in advance to avoid exceeding the legal limit.
- Be prepared to enforce policy by asking additional people not to enter and/or removing people who do not wear masks.
- Having attendees sign waivers, as has been done at events such as some of President Trump's rallies, is a good idea, although not foolproof, as some courts discourage having individuals sign away their rights to sue.

From a pastoral perspective, leaders should ask themselves how much these adjustments take away from the ineffable, worshipful experience the church desires to create, Rev. Washington-Leapheart said. What is legally allowed, what makes sense for the congregation, and what is right for the community do not always align.

Ultimately, she said, the city administration's policy is "we would rather be wise now than sorry later."

—Bob Fisher

(Disclaimer: Neither this summary nor the webinar itself constitute legal advice or consultation. For specifics in your local context, consult your legal counsel.)

Update: New Order Limits Size Of Gatherings

July 16, 2020 in Public Health



In an executive order that went into effect at 12:01 am today (July 16), Gov. Wolf announced **new restrictions limiting gatherings to 25 persons indoors and 250 persons outdoors**. Organizations are also required to conduct operations by telework unless the work must be done on premises.

Update: According to Pennlive.com, [both the governor and Health Secretary Levine answered "no" when asked if the restrictions apply to churches](#). This likely means that no enforcement actions will be taken against churches at this time. Churches are urged to maintain social distancing, wearing of masks, and other preventative measures. Bishop Davenport has encouraged congregations to make the safety of worshippers, church staff and clergy, and the community a priority in making decisions to return to in-person worship.

The important takeaway is that Pennsylvania health officials are concerned about increasing community transmission of coronavirus. Congregations are advised to take community case trends into account when planning for indoor or outdoor activities.

"During the past week, we have seen an unsettling climb in new COVID-19 cases," the governor said in a press release announcing the new order. "Medical experts looking at the trajectory we are on now are projecting that this new surge could soon eclipse the April peak. With our rapid case increases we need to act again now."

The order prohibits indoor gatherings of more than 25 persons, and outdoor

gatherings of more than 250 persons. Wearing of masks and keeping social distancing is required in all contexts.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

Updated: July 17, 2020 at 2:40 pm to add information about the governor's press conference and Bishop Davenport's encouragement for churches.

Clarification on Gathering Size Limits

July 20, 2020 in Public Health



Gov. Wolf's latest order restricting gatherings to 25 persons indoors and 250 persons outdoors do not apply to religious institutions. Asked specifically about this at a July 15 news conference, Secretary Levine and the governor both responded "no." ()

While the restrictions are not mandatory for congregations, churches are still encouraged to take precautions such as masking and social distancing.

The governor's mitigation order is targeted at bars, restaurants, and other places where people gather in crowds. Churches are excluded for first amendment reasons, yet we operate in the same climate of increasing community spread of the virus. Scientific research indicates caution, as churches have been the scene of [a number of super spreader events](#). [Singing](#), communal eating, and communion are also considered risky.

Bishop Davenport has encouraged congregations to make the safety of worshippers, church staff and clergy, and the community a priority in making decisions to return to in-person worship. Congregations are advised to take community case trends into account when planning for indoor or outdoor activities.

You will also want to take into account local guidelines. In Philadelphia, for example, officials urge churches not to meet in-person. Philadelphia's ["Reopening With Care" webpage](#) indicates that a date has not been set for the resumption of religious gatherings with more than 25 persons within the city. [The guidance](#) also prohibits group singing.



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#ELCACHurchTogether

Resources to help leaders and members stay connected and resilient during COVID-19.

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<https://community.elca.org/advanced-donation-form/covid-19-response-fund>

COVID-19 Response Fund (<https://community.elca.org/advanced-donation-form/covid-19-response-fund>)



You can help the ministries of the ELCA by supporting your local congregation and making

a gift to the ELCA's COVID-19 Response Fund (<https://community.elca.org/advanced-donation-form/covid-19-response-fund>). Your donation will provide funds to the ministries of the ELCA most in need and best positioned to help. This includes our congregations as well as local and churchwide ministries capable of reaching and assisting those in need.

[GIVE NOW \(HTTPS://COMMUNITY.ELCA.ORG/ADVANCED-DONATION-FORM/COVID-19-RESPONSE-FUND\)](https://community.elca.org/advanced-donation-form/covid-19-response-fund)

WORSHIP RESOURCES

Resources for Worship in the Home (<https://blogs.elca.org/worship/>)

A weekly blog series with readings, prayers and reflections for worship at home.

Resources for Returning to In-Person Worship

(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Returning_to_in-person_Worship.pdf)

Considerations for being church together during the COVID-19 pandemic. | Spanish
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Returning_to_in-

person_Worship_SP.pdf)

“Resuming Care-filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Resuming_Care-filled_Worship_and_Sacramental_Life.pdf)”

Protocols for worship during the COVID-19 pandemic as commended by an ecumenical consultation. | Spanish
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Reanudando_El_Culto_Cristiano.pdf)

“Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: COVID-19/Coronavirus
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns_SP.pdf)

Considerations for building church community and participating in worship when we cannot gather in person. | Spanish
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns_SP.pdf)

“Prayers for Times of Public Health Concern: COVID-19/Coronavirus
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Prayers_for_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns_COVID-19_SP.pdf)”

Prayer suggestions that can be adapted for use in your local worship context. | Spanish
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Prayers_for_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns_COVID-19_SP.pdf)

“How to Stream Your Worship Service
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Livestreaming_for_Congregations.pdf)

A starter guide for online streaming of your congregation’s worship service or other events.
| Spanish
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Livestreaming_for_Congregations_SP.pdf)

“Intercessory Prayers in the Midst of the Spread of COVID-19
(https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2020/documents/200312_-_intercessory_prayer_in_the_midst_of_the_spread_of_covid_-_en.pdf)”

A prayer resource offered by the Lutheran World Federation. | Spanish
(https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2020/documents/200312_-_intercessory_prayer_in_the_midst_of_the_spread_of_covid_-_es.pdf)

“Guidance for Funeral Practices
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Guidance_for_funeral_practices_during_a_public_health_crisis_SP.pdf)

A resource for ministering to the bereaved during a public health crisis. | Spanish
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Guidance_for_funeral_practices_during_a_public_health_crisis_SP.pdf)

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CONGREGATIONAL ADMINISTRATION AND SUPPORT

Considerations for safely reopening by Church Mutual
(<https://www.churchmutual.com/index.cfm?ldp=elca>)

Church Mutual offers a webinar, slides and guidelines to prepare and implement a plan to safely reopen churches.

FAQ on Paycheck Protection Program loans (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/FAQ_on_PPP_Loans.pdf)

Frequently asked questions regarding congregations and PPP loans. | Watch Video
(<https://vimeo.com/405954210>) | Spanish
(https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/FAQ_on_PPP_Loans-SP.pdf)

“Update and Resources on COVID-19-related Benefits for ELCA Congregations, Synods, Other Ministries and Their Employees (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/COVID-19_Relief_Summary.pdf)”

A summary focusing on the provisions of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) that most directly affect churches and their employees. | Spanish (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/COVID-19_Relief_Summary-SP.pdf)

Guides for Community Assistance Resources by State (<https://blogs.elca.org/worldhunger/covid-assistance/>)

ELCA World Hunger offers a set of state-specific one-pagers designed for people to learn how to access things like SNAP, unemployment and other emergency assistance during the COVID-19 crisis.

ELCA Federal Credit Union is now SBA-certified to offer Paycheck Protection Program loans (<https://www.elcafcu.org/ppp>)

All ELCA congregations and ministries can apply for these PPP loans through the ELCA Federal Credit Union.

“Summary of CARES Act Provisions (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/CARES_Act_Summary.pdf)”

Provisions in the CARES Act that could be of interest to church ministries and church plan members. | Spanish (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/CARES_Act_Summary_SP.pdf)

Families First Coronavirus Response Act — UCC update (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/Families_First_Coronavirus_Response_Act-UCC_Update.pdf)

A memorandum from the United Church of Christ that summarizes the new provisions in the FFCRA most applicable to churches.

Mission Investment Fund and ELCA Federal Credit Union offer special assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/MIF_and_ELCA_Federal_Credit_Union)

Special financial assistance from the Mission Investment Fund and the ELCA Federal Credit Union.

“Congregational Planning Checklist for Public Health Concerns (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/LDR_Congregational_Planning_Checklist.pdf)”

Lutheran Disaster Response details how you and your congregation can plan for the impact of a public health crisis in your church. | Spanish (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/LDR_Congregational_Planning_Checklist_SP.pdf)

“Considerations for Remote Council and Congregation Meetings During the COVID-19 Pandemic (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/Remote_Meeting_FAQ_for_Congregations.pdf)”

Frequently asked questions regarding appropriate use of technology to conduct the business of your congregation.

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FROM THE PRESIDING BISHOP

Navigating a return to in-person worship | ELCA Bishop Elizabeth Eaton on CNN



“Navigating a return to in-person worship | ELCA Bishop Elizabeth Eaton on CNN

Previous videos from ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton:

- “If not now, when? (<https://youtu.be/oXeyuSR5mNc>)” | May 28, 2020
- “Take time to enjoy God's creation (<https://youtu.be/HBhIEAeWB4k>)” | May 21, 2020
- “God wants us to be whole people (<https://youtu.be/479Jm1tmdOc>)” | May 14, 2020
- “God is working (<https://youtu.be/479Jm1tmdOc>)” | May 7, 2020
- “We still have God and each other (<https://youtu.be/TNrPChW66V0>)” | April 30, 2020
- “Hope doesn't disappoint (<https://youtu.be/wr-9uwpBFPQ>)” | April 23, 2020
- “It's okay to grieve and hope (<https://youtu.be/Pm-v3SqeRO4>)” | April 17, 2020
- “There will be joy (<https://youtu.be/HWfXKHmjDc>)” | Easter message | April 9, 2020
- “We remain united (<https://youtu.be/O5kpx12y9HU>)” | Holy Week invitation | April 3, 2020
- “Be of good courage! (<https://youtu.be/F-o5ohOoai4>)” | April 1, 2020
- “A God Who Is Faithful (<https://youtu.be/XzrxzAPeu2g>)” | March 28, 2020
- “Bishop Eaton on COVID-19 (https://youtu.be/S6Nd_T4R_EY)” | March 12, 2020

Pastoral messages and statements from ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton:

- “ELCA presiding bishop issues pastoral message on COVID-19 racism and white supremacy (<https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8037>)” | May 13, 2020
- “Urgent resources needed for East Jerusalem hospitals facing spread of coronavirus (<https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8035>)” | April 17, 2020
- “Response to COVID-19 From ELCA Presiding Bishop (<https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8031>)” | March 27, 2020 | Spanish (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/Covid-19_Bishop_SP.pdf)
- “ELCA Presiding Bishop Addresses Concerns About COVID-19 (<https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8025>)” | March 6, 2020

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TAKE ACTION: PRAY, GIVE, CONNECT

COVID-19 Response Fund (<https://community.elca.org/advanced-donation->

form/covid-19-response-fund)

You can help the ministries of the ELCA by supporting your local congregation and making a gift to the ELCA's COVID-19 Response Fund (<https://community.elca.org/advanced-donation-form/covid-19-response-fund>). Your donation will provide funds to the ministries of the ELCA most in need and best positioned to help. This includes our congregations as well as local and churchwide ministries capable of reaching and assisting those in need.

ELCA Advocacy and COVID-19 (<https://blogs.elca.org/advocacy/>)

This series of blogs by ELCA Advocacy (<https://blogs.elca.org/advocacy/>) supports policy discernment and information sharing.

Lutheran Disaster Response | “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)” (<https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/Lutheran-Disaster-Response/Our-Impact/Coronavirus>)

LDR is responding to the pandemic here in the United States and around the world.

Living Lutheran | Special coverage of COVID-19 (<https://www.livinglutheran.org/tag/covid-19/>)

Living Lutheran reports on how ELCA communities are responding to the pandemic.

ELCA COVID-19 Response logo files (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/COVID19_Graphic_Files.zip)

Use these graphics in newsletters, email or social media to support your community's COVID-19 response efforts. The files are available in .jpg, .png and .eps formats.

2020 Senior Recognition Ideas (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Senior_Recognition_Ideas.pdf)

Our high school seniors are missing out on once-in-a-lifetime experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognize and celebrate your congregation's graduating seniors with these ideas from ELCA Youth. | Spanish (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Senior_Recognition_Ideas-SP.pdf)

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SPANISH-LANGUAGE RESOURCES

- Reanudando El Culto Cristiano y La Vida Sacramental con Medidas Preventivas Durante una Pandemia (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Reanudando_El_Culto_Cristiano.p)
- Consideraciones para el regreso a los servicios de adoración en persona (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Returning_to_In-person_Worship_SP.pdf)
- “Preguntas frecuentes sobre el Programa de Protección del Cheque de pago (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/FAQ_on_PPP_Loans-SP.pdf)”
- “Guía para prácticas fúnebres: Ministración a los deudos durante una crisis de salud pública (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Guidance_for_funeral_practices_

- “Adoración en Tiempo de Problemas de Salud Pública: COVID19/Coronavirus (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/Worship_in_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns_SP.pdf)”
- “Oraciones para Tiempos de Problemas de Salud Pública: COVID19/Coronavirus (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/Prayers_for_Times_of_Public_Health_Concerns_COVID-19_SP.pdf)”
- “Cómo Transmitir por Internet su Servicio de Adoración — Guía del Principiante (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/Livestreaming_for_Congregations_SP.pdf)”
- “Oración de Intercesión en Medio de la Propagación del COVID-19 (https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2020/documents/200312_-_intercessory_prayer_in_the_midst_of_the_spread_of_covid_-_es.pdf)”
- “Noticias y Recursos Sobre Beneficios Relacionados con el COVID-19 Para las Congregaciones de la ELCA, los Sínodos y Otros Ministerios y Sus Empleados (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/COVID-19_Relief_Summary-SP.pdf)”
- “Planificación Congregacional Para Problemas de Salud Pública: Lista de Control (https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/LDR_Congregational_Planning_Checklist_SP.pdf)”
- Response to COVID-19 from ELCA Presiding Bishop (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Covid-19_Bishop_SP.pdf)
- Los Centros Para el Control y la Prevención de Enfermedades (CDC) (<http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index-sp.html>)
- Ideas de reconocimiento a los graduandos de 2020 del Ministerio de Jóvenes de la ELCA (https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Senior_Recognition_Ideas-SP.pdf)

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YOUR FAITH AT HOME

Faith at Home | Resources from ELCA Faith Formation
(<https://www.ministrylinks.online/faith-at-home.html>)

This collection of resources supports unique and innovate ways leaders and congregations can adapt to this new reality of ministry.

Faith formation guide (<https://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/ELCAfaithformation.pdf>)

Recommended practices for lifelong faith formation.

Bible study (<https://elca.org/Resources/Bible-Studies>)

Resources for you to continue daily discipleship and faith practices from home.

Prayer Ventures (<https://elca.org/Resources/Prayer-Ventures>)

Daily prayers for the life and mission of the church.

“Faith Practices — Living Our Baptism (<https://elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Faith-Practices>)”

The promises made in holy baptism serve as a guide for practicing Christian faith.

Lectionary (<https://elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Worship/Lectionary>)

The Revised Common Lectionary provides Scripture readings for Sundays, festivals and daily use.

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STEWARDSHIP OF GIFTS

Now that many congregations are observing social distancing, with some offering online services, members may be concerned about how to support the work of their congregations, synods and churchwide ministries. A majority of ELCA congregations currently offer online giving as an option and all still accept checks. For congregations hoping to establish online giving, the ELCA has negotiated with preferred vendors (<https://elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Communication-Tools/Preferred-Vendors>) who can quickly respond with options.

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KEEP UP-TO-DATE

Due to the nature of the virus, information is being updated on a daily basis. We encourage you to contact and listen to your local health experts and authorities concerning best practices and the status of outbreaks in your local context. The following links may also serve as helpful resources.

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**
(<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/summary.html>)
- **World Health Organization**
(<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>)

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This is Christ's church.
There is a place for you here.

Looking for Something?

Find a Congregation
(<https://www.elca.org/tools/FindACongregation>)

Contact Information

ELCA Churchwide Ministries
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Worship in Times of Public Health Concerns: COVID-19/Coronavirus

Updated March 20, 2020

When anxiety is high in our culture, worship continues to be a primary location for the proclamation both of the good news of Jesus Christ and of the continuing compassion and care of God in the midst of our humanity. It is a place where we can find solace and reassurance in the midst of our fears.

When worshipping together in person is not advised or prohibited by municipal/state government, leaders are facing circumstances they have likely not encountered. This resource is offered to help consider how we are the body of Christ together when we cannot gather in-person for worship. Ministry at this time is not easy; gentleness with one another is welcomed as we live as the body of Christ in the world.

Livestreaming/temporary virtual worship communities

Communities may consider alternate ways to gather using technology in this time. For those communities who would like to form a virtual community for worship, a helpful document, "[How to stream your worship service — A starter guide](#)," offers advice on livestreaming worship or creating an alternative virtual worshipping community.

The elements of Service of the Word (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 210) or one of the Daily Prayer services (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 295-331) can be easily adapted for use in a virtual gathering.

Consider how to honor the body of Christ in your virtual community. When possible, utilize technology that allows people to see one another. Find ways to incorporate others in leadership roles. Assign individuals to read Scripture or lead prayers from their location. Use chat features to communicate prayer requests. Assign someone to monitor the chat feed and gather these requests. Consider short, repetitive songs to allow the community to sing together remotely. Movement may still be part of a virtual gathering. Encourage people to stand to hear the Gospel or for the intercessions. Individuals may be encouraged to light a candle or have a glass of water nearby to remember our baptism.

When leading prayers or litanies with assembly responses in a virtual setting, the leader will want to speak the assembly parts aloud. Adding a slight pause before the response will help indicate that it is time to respond.

“Hear us, O God.” (*Slight pause.*) **“Your mercy is great.”**

Realize that what you are doing is not a production and it will not be perfect. Gather around word and prayer and look to God whom we need more than ever.

Worship leaders are encouraged to find creative ways to build community and offer pastoral care in times where some or all people cannot gather together for worship. Some examples include:

- Host a virtual coffee hour for conversation with one another and with congregational leaders. Some digital platforms allow a larger group of participants to break up into smaller groups for conversation.
- Lead Bible studies, conversations and other classes, such as confirmation, using technology like Zoom or Google Hangouts.
- Host a regular conference call (using Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.) to check in.
- Share daily devotions via social media, email or text.

- Consider setting a common prayer time so folks know they are praying together even if they aren't gathered in person.
- Create a phone tree for checking in with those who are isolated and/or not connected online.
- For leaders who decide that livestreaming is not the best option for their community, they may provide devotions based on the weekly texts for use in their homes.

Virtual worship and Holy Communion

We live in anxious times. COVID-19 makes these times even more anxious. In a time of crisis, it is our natural instinct to gather together, but this pandemic demands that we distance ourselves from one another for a time. This has led to major disruptions to all aspects of our lives, including corporate worship. There is discussion and experimentation with the celebration and distribution of Holy Communion.

This disruption may actually be of benefit to us. The world has hit the pause button and now we have time to reflect more deeply on the evangelical understanding of the Word that was recovered during the Reformation. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate. The proclamation of God's message to us as both law and gospel is the Word of God. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. The question should be turned around from, "How do we receive Holy Communion?" to "How does the Word of God come to us and how do we receive the Word of God?" God comes to us in all these ways and is really present. Holy Communion is not the only way that the Word of God is communicated—it's not even the preeminent way that the Word of God is communicated.

This disruption also gives us the time and space to examine our understanding of and practices around Holy Communion. Some will remember times when communion was celebrated once a month. Now we have done such a good job of encouraging our people to receive the sacrament more frequently that many, if not most, of our congregations have weekly communion! Of course, the pandemic-forced physical distancing has interrupted this practice. But it hasn't separated us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). We don't know how long this pandemic will last, but it won't last forever. Fasting from Holy Communion for a time might be a good discipline. This absence makes God's presence more profound. During this limited fast we might become more aware of God's presence around us and in creation in ways that we have never noticed before. Even in times when a community cannot gather to share the sacrament, Jesus shows up, and we are still part of the body of Christ.

"[The Use of the Means of Grace](#)" reminds us that Holy Communion takes place in the assembly (Principle 39). We recommend that we do not urge people to employ virtual communion, that deacons, pastors, and bishops use this time as a teaching moment about the Lutheran understanding of the Word of God, and that we make use of the Service of the Word and Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Night Prayer and Responsive Prayer. Let us spend time in scripture study, pray for each other, and contact others regularly by phone, email or social media.

Above all, let us remember to be gentle with one another in this time. We've never been here before. We are all trying to do our best to be faithful and loving in this time of COVID-19. We trust that the presence of Christ goes before us and behind us, around us and within us. In the words of Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton's message: "Respect the disease. Do not take unnecessary risks. Provide for the spiritual and physical needs of the neighbor. Make use of medical aid. Care for one another, especially the most vulnerable."

Further questions may be directed to the Worship team of the Office of the Presiding Bishop at 800-638-3522, ext. 2590, or worship@elca.org.

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Considerations for Returning to In-person Worship

Being Church Together During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Updated May 12, 2020

Introduction

As ELCA congregations face difficult decisions regarding when and how they will be able to gather again for worship, this resource offers general guidance. Please note that this not a comprehensive, one-size-fits-all resource; it will need to be interpreted and adapted for your local context. In many, if not most contexts, it will not be safe or advisable to gather for in-person worship for some time. National, state, and local medical and legal guidelines will need to be consulted and followed. While risk is not avoidable, this guidance is presented with the aim of reducing the level of risk for your community. Your pastor and congregational leaders will want to carefully consider:

- legally binding orders
- the safety of the community and congregation
- recommendations from health officials¹
- recommendations from your synod office
- insurer loss-control recommendations and your insurance policy
- following state guidelines and federal guidelines for a three-phased approach to opening.² Of particular note are the criteria for moving from strict physical distancing (Phase 1) to a staged reopening (Phase 2):
 - (1) The number of new cases has declined for at least 14 days.
 - (2) Rapid diagnostic testing capacity is sufficient to test, at minimum, all people with COVID-19 symptoms, including mild cases, as well as their close contacts and those in essential roles.
 - (3) The health care system is able to safely care for all patients, including providing appropriate personal protective equipment for health care workers.
 - (4) There is sufficient public health capacity to conduct contact tracing for all new cases and their close contacts.

Be mindful that the “staged” or “phased” approach presented in a number of resources will likely not be a linear one; there may be times of gradual reopening as infections decrease, followed by restrictions if new waves of infections emerge.

In all situations, you will want to err on the side of love for your neighbor and know that change will be inevitable. Patience, grace, and flexibility will be necessary as you strive to make the most appropriate

¹ “Community and Faith-Based Organizations: Plan, Prepare, and Respond,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>.

² “National Coronavirus Response: A Road Map to Reopening,” American Enterprise Institute, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/national-coronavirus-response-a-road-map-to-reopening/>; “Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19: Guidance for Governors,” Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Health Security, https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf; and “Guidelines: Opening Up America Again,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>.

decisions for the people of God in your place at this time. In addition to worship planning, it will be helpful to spend time reflecting upon on what you have done online or in-person, as this time will likely lead to new insights and discoveries for your worshipping community.

Please note that resources in this document have been gathered from many sources, including several linked throughout this document. We are grateful to synod and ecumenical colleagues for the insights they have provided.

Part I: General Considerations

Preparation and Communication

- Assess the risks associated with decisions you will make about the timing and extent of returning to in-person gatherings.³
- When you prepare to return to in-person worship, and throughout this time, be sure to communicate clearly with your congregation through all appropriate channels, including: mail, newsletters, email, websites, and social media. Identify and address potential language and cultural barriers and barriers associated with having different abilities so that all can access the information you need to communicate.
- Review the church's membership rolls and designate leaders or teams to check in on members in ways that are safe and appropriate. Make extra efforts to connect with those who live alone, have suffered loss and grief, are less comfortable with technology, or struggle with mental health concerns.
- Use clear signage that describes church policies and best hygiene practices.
- Follow guidelines for cleaning and disinfecting all spaces prior to people returning.⁴
- Ask people not to attend worship if they are feeling ill, have been exposed to COVID-19, have compromised immune systems, or are at high risk of exposing others. Let them know they are welcome to participate in other ways such as online worship and protect those at high risk from any social stigma associated with their decision not to attend.

Physical Building and Grounds

- Study what is possible or not for your worshipping community, including “drive-up” worshipping options where worshipers remain in their cars for the duration of the event. Consider initial small gatherings held outdoors (where this is an option). Research all applicable local fire codes and seek the advice of the local fire department.
- Determine if your normally-used worship space is the most suitable space in your building for gathering at this time. Are there larger rooms, such as a fellowship hall, if your worship space is small?
- Close spaces/rooms in the building where people do not need to be.
- Map clear routes of movement from the entryway into the worship space, and plan ways to maintain physical distancing while people move along those routes.
- As applicable, set HVAC systems to introduce fresh air into the worship space and/or open windows and doors to encourage fresh air over recycled air.
- Make preparations for restroom distancing. Limit the number who may enter at the same time, using tape on the floor for those waiting in order to maintain proper physical distancing.

³ See “The Importance of Risk Assessment,” p. 8, in “Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19,” Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Health Security, https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf.

⁴ “Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>.

- Do not provide nursery care at this time.
- Remove materials from the worship and gathering spaces such as bibles, hymnals, pens, information cards, welcome pads, children’s bags, etc.
- Remove any items made with soft/porous materials (rugs/chairs/cushions), if possible, to reduce challenges for cleaning and disinfecting them.
- Consider not handing out bulletins. Projection onto a screen may be an alternative in some worship spaces. If possible, pre-place bulletins in the sections where seating is allowed. This will provide another visual cue for physical distancing.

Hygiene and Safety

- Provide hand sanitizer at all entrances and in the pews/seating area.
- Clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces daily. Overall cleaning and disinfection should happen at regular intervals, especially after and between worship/events.
- Require face masks/coverings; have some available for those who arrive without them.⁵
- Continue to encourage good hygiene practices.

Physical Distancing

- Offer multiple services with fewer attendees instead of one or two services (see provisional timeline below).
- Encourage people to sign up for worship services in advance, up to a set number, while still allowing for a few new people to drop in. This will be helpful in maintaining a record of who was physically present in the event a case is identified and assistance is needed with contact tracing.
- Make preparations and plans for reorganizing seating when necessary. This is easier with flexible seating; fixed pews are more of a challenge. Use tape to close off rows in order to guide worshipers to sit at least six feet from each other, such as every third row. This does not apply to family members in a single household.
- Limit people’s movement in worship to reduce their occupying of the same air space and the likelihood of inadvertent close contact.
- Consider how ushers and greeters will guide those entering and exiting in new ways that maintain proper physical distancing.

Speaking, Singing, and Playing Instruments in Worship

- Singing together, even from a distance, is one of the riskiest behaviors due to the spread of aerosol and droplets that can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air. A cloth mask is unlikely to protect you or your neighbor. For more about communal singing at this time, see a webinar offered by the National Association of Teachers of Singing and others.⁶
- Similar caution applies to unison speaking, such as reciting the Lord’s Prayer and other communal speech.
- Like singing, playing a wind instrument initiates a spread of aerosol and droplets and poses a strong risk of infection.

⁵ “Recommendation Regarding the Use of Cloth Face Coverings, Especially in Areas of Significant Community-Based Transmission,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover.html>.

⁶ “A Conversation: What Do Science and Data Say About the Near Term Future of Singing,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q&t=1574s>, and “Church Music in the Age of COVID-19,” Wisconsin Council of Churches, <https://www.wichurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Returning-to-Church-Church-Music-final.pdf>.

- Consider how church musicians can best be supported financially and otherwise during this difficult time.
- Feature instrumental music and find other ways for worshipers to participate: for instance, clapping, moving in rhythm, or using small percussion instruments.
- When and where it is safe to do so, feature music from soloists or small ensembles, with the congregation praying through attentive listening.
- Use online worship opportunities and soloists or small ensembles to teach and learn new songs from the hymnal or other sources; have a song of the week or month and invite worshipers to sing it at home.
- Encourage members to order hymnals to keep and use at home, especially if they must continue to worship at home for some time.

Worship Practices

- Refrain from passing a collection plate or basket during the offering; have stations where people can place offerings and/or provide them with online giving options.
- Omit offering processions where others handle money/plates or communion vessels.
- Provide alternate methods of sharing the peace outside of family households. These could include the exchange of words, waves, offering a reverent bow, or using American Sign Language.
- Avoid greeting “receiving lines” at the door before and after worship.

Holy Baptism

- Keep baptismal fonts empty of water or, if they are filled as a visual reminder, discourage the practice of remembering your baptism by touching the water.
- Sanitize the font and fill it with fresh water before a baptism.

Holy Communion

- The practice of sharing in Holy Communion is not advised until well into the final phases of gatherings of 50 or more people (see below).
- Those preparing and serving communion should sanitize their hands immediately before distributing communion; doing so in view of the congregation may help in reducing anxiety.
- During the Great Thanksgiving, the presiding minister may stand back from the table and not further touch the bread and cup.
- Congregations should refrain from kneeling or standing close together at a communion rail or in a line.
- Wafers may be a safer option than bread during this time. A package of wafers can be emptied onto a paten with minimal touch. Bread requires more handling.
- Common cup and intinction are not recommended.
- If distributing wine in small glasses in trays, ensure that the glasses are spaced far enough apart to minimize people’s touching of other glasses.
- Communion in one kind may be encouraged. A chalice may also be filled with a minimal amount of wine, and communicants could reverence the cup while not partaking of the wine, still hearing the words “the blood of Christ, shed for you.”
- The use of pre-filled, disposable wine and wafer cups may appear to be convenient and safer but are not without risk; they are also challenging to open and may be cost-prohibitive.

Worship Leadership

- Worship leaders may not need to wear masks if they are over six feet away (an analogy for this would be public health officials who do not wear masks for press conferences when following

physical distancing protocol). Leaders may still choose to wear masks and should if they come into closer proximity with others.

- Presiding ministers should use a stand, chair, etc., for books rather than have these held by an assisting minister.
- Preachers and presiders must be mindful of physical distancing when speaking, especially because leaders need to project their voices.
- Leaders should refrain from greeting worshippers at the door before or after worship.

Part II: Provisional Timeline by Size of Gathering

The following guidance is organized based on the size of the in-person gathering. In general, keep in mind:

- Congregations will need to refrain from in-person worship until it is safe and advisable to do so; this may be longer than anticipated and decisions will need to be clearly communicated.
- Continuing to provide online resources, home worship resources, or other tangible connection is encouraged even when 50 or more can gather. This is for the sake of those 65 or older, vulnerable, or afraid to gather in person.
- During this time you are encouraged to hold [daily prayer in the home](#). Even when we cannot sing together in community, singing at home is encouraged.
- Congregational leaders need to know how many people their worship space can hold if they are worshipping in family groups and sitting six feet apart, and should manage movement into and out of the building and worship space.
- Be mindful of the workload of leaders if they begin to offer worship both online and in-person, as this will require additional preparation. Also, consider additional compensation for janitorial staff when more frequent cleaning is necessary.

No gathering in-person, complete physical distancing (Federal Guideline Phase 1):

- Worship remains online or in the home.
- Worship leaders conduct online worship from home.
- Use technology in a way that helps those participating from home feel like active participants rather than passive observers.
- See the ELCA's guidelines on "virtual worship."⁷

Church activities restricted to 10 people or fewer:

- Regular Sunday worship is held online.
- Leaders may begin recording in the church building/worship space (if they have been doing this from home) while maintaining at least six feet of space between people and a greater distance between those who are singing.
- The church building might be opened for individual prayer at prearranged times and with face masks and proper physical distancing (at least six feet).
- The church building may be used to conduct funerals or weddings but only for immediate family (fewer than 10 people).
- High-risk individuals (people over 65 or with underlying conditions), including staff, continue to shelter in place. Consider alternative in-person leadership if staff members are over 65 or have underlying conditions that put them at risk.

⁷ "Worship Resources," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," <https://www.elca.org/publichealth>.

- Bible studies and other small groups may continue to meet online. Staff might consider limited meetings at the church with appropriate physical distancing.
- Consider posting signs about noncontact greetings and refraining from shaking hands or hugging, as well as other practices or measures put into place.
- Churches will need extensive cleaning/sanitation prior to people returning to the building and between other in-person gatherings. Measures will be increased as groups grow larger than 5 to 10 people.
- Communicate with the congregation about preparations being made for returning to in-person worship when such worship is safe.

Church activities restricted to 50 people or fewer (Federal Guideline Phase 2):

- Review guidance above in “Part I: General Considerations.”
- Consider whether in-person worship is or is not advisable in your context (under 65, no underlying conditions).
- Institute increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church.
- Congregations with greater than 50 average worship attendance might want to consider additional services with cleaning occurring between services. Consider other small-group options as well.
- Maintain physical distancing in worship (at least six feet, excluding households). If the worship space has pews, limit one family unit per pew; keep empty pews between families.
- Close common areas (fellowship halls, church offices, coffee spaces).
- Refrain from communion, handshakes, passing offering plates, and handing out printed bulletins.
- Worshipers wear masks at all times.
- Consider other in-person leadership if leaders are over 65 or have underlying conditions that put them at risk.

Church activities open for more than 50 people (Federal Guideline Phase 3):

- Maintain increased sanitation/cleaning and hygiene measures at church.
- Resume in-person worship with other members (insofar as they feel comfortable doing so).
- Continue online worship for those who still cannot gather.
- Resume communion, etc., with additional precautionary measures.
- Physical distancing may be relaxed and masks may become optional in some places based on various factors and recommendations from officials.

Suggestions and Links to Other Resources

ELCA.org/PublicHealth: Resources to help leaders and members stay connected and resilient during COVID-19. <https://www.elca.org/PublicHealth>

“Returning to Church”: The Wisconsin Council of Churches offers helpful guidance. <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/> Other information is available at <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/03/11/coronavirus>.

“Returning to Public Worship: Theological and Practical Considerations”: Guidance from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/covid-19/returning_to_public_worship_may_2020.pdf

On May 5, 2020, the Minneapolis Area Synod hosted a conversation with Dr. Michael Osterholm, Regents Professor, McKnight Presidential Endowed Chair in Public Health, and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota. You can find the link to this presentation at <https://mpls-synod.org>.

For more on congregational singing, see the website for the National Association of Teachers of Singing, <https://www.nats.org>.

Consult the following national and state resources:

“Coronavirus (COVID-19),” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/>.

“Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Pandemic,” World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>.

“National Coronavirus Response: A Road Map to Reopening,” American Enterprise Institute, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/national-coronavirus-response-a-road-map-to-reopening/>.

“Public Health Principles for a Phased Reopening During COVID-19: Guidance for Governors,” Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Health Security, https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200417-reopening-guidance-governors.pdf.

“Guidelines: Opening Up America Again,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>.



Considerations for Remote Council and Congregation Meetings During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During this time of social distancing because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many congregation leaders are asking how they can take advantage of technology to continue to hold necessary meetings to conduct the business of the congregation. Please bear in mind that some matters may best be postponed until the restrictions on gatherings have been lifted. Others, though, are pressing, or are mandatory by your constitution and bylaws, and need to be dealt with. Your bishop or synod staff can help you determine what matters might better be left for another time.

If after consultation it is determined that you need to hold a meeting to make necessary decisions, there are some important factors to take into consideration before proceeding to call a meeting. Below is an FAQ of the questions being asked most often. **In every case, however, it is vital that you consult with your bishop or synod staff before proceeding to schedule a meeting.** Even in the current crisis, the rules have not all gone out the window, and state law, as well as your constitution, bylaws and continuing resolutions, must still be respected.

Q: Where do we look to determine if we can have remote meetings?

A: You should look to the law of the state in which your congregation is incorporated (which in almost all cases is the state in which the congregation is located). Most states authorize remote meetings for members (i.e., the congregation meeting) and/or directors (i.e., the congregation council). These provisions are typically located in the state's nonprofit corporation act. Note that the provisions for members' meetings (congregation) and directors' meetings (council) are typically separate and should be considered separately.

Q: What do these state laws say?

A: Each state is different, but there are three common "flavors" that are used:

- **State law authorizes it outright.** In this case, you need look no further.
- **State law authorizes it unless the corporation's bylaws say otherwise.** In this case, you can have a remote meeting unless your constitution and bylaws prohibit remote meetings. This is unlikely, as we do not have model provisions prohibiting remote meetings.
- **State law allows it if the corporation's bylaws authorize it.** In this case, you have to look to see if your congregation's constitution authorizes remote meetings.

Consult your bishop or synod staff to seek the advice of your synod's attorney, who will know the statutes for your state.

Q: If needed, where do we look in our congregation constitution to see if remote meetings are authorized?

A: For congregational meetings, look to see if your congregation has included this provision from the *Model Constitution for Congregations* (or a similar one):

C10.08. This congregation may hold meetings by remote communication, including electronically and by telephone conference, as long as there is an opportunity for simultaneous aural communication. To the extent permitted by state law, notice of all meetings may be provided electronically.

For council meetings, look to see if your congregation has included this provision from the *Model Constitution for Congregations* (or a similar one):

C12.13. The Congregation Council and its committees may hold meetings by remote communication, including electronically and by telephone conference, as long as there is an opportunity for simultaneous aural communication. To the extent permitted by state law, notice of all meetings may be provided electronically.

Q: We never updated our constitution to include these provisions. Does this mean we can't hold a remote meeting?

A: Not necessarily. As discussed above, the place to start is with your state law. If the statute expressly allows for remote meetings or permits them unless your constitution or bylaws expressly forbid such meetings, you can

have remote meetings even if your documents are silent on the subject. Only if you are in a state that requires authorization in the bylaws could you be barred from holding a remote meeting if your governing documents do not authorize it.

If your state requires a provision for remote meetings to be in the bylaws, and the congregation doesn't have such a provision, one solution might be to have the congregation council meet remotely or in person and adopt a continuing resolution authorizing remote meetings in compliance with state law. It might be challenged, but the best guess is that the courts would be lenient, given current circumstances.

Q: We have confirmed that we are legally authorized to hold remote meetings. Now what?

A: Next you must determine how your meeting will be carried out. Typically, provisions for remote meetings require that there be simultaneous aural communication: that is, every participant must be able to hear and to speak, with two-way communication possible. A platform that only allows people to listen, for example, would not be appropriate.

You must also consider those members who do not have online access. In choosing a technological platform, you should select one that allows for both online and dial-in participation so that as many members can participate as reasonably possible.

Q: What notification do we have to give for a remote meeting?

A: You must give the same notification normally required by your constitution and bylaws for that type of meeting. For example, if your constitution requires that notice be given by mail or electronically a certain number of days before a meeting, and that it be announced at two consecutive Sunday worship services, you would still need to comply with those requirements. If you are streaming worship services, you would need to announce the meeting in those services, just as you would normally do.

Q: How do we establish quorum?

A: The same quorum requirements that your constitution establishes for face-to-face meetings apply to remote ones. The most effective means of assessing whether you have quorum might be by taking an oral roll call of voting members who are participating in the meeting. Some electronic platforms will list all the participants in a meeting. You may be able to take a screenshot or print out the list of participants and save it for your records. One challenge would be to verify the identity of persons who are dialing in and are not visible, but in many congregations it should be possible to verify by voice if members are known to one another. You also need to allow for situations where more than one person is participating from a single post (e.g., couples or families with teens who are voting members).

Q: How do we take a vote?

A: Some congregations are having members drive in written ballots to drop off at a designated location between a set number of hours. If you choose that option, you need to draw up a list of those participating in the meeting so that only those who have been in the meeting are allowed to drop off ballots.

Others are going by spoken yeas or nays or polling each individual voting member participating in the meeting in a voice vote. Some are choosing to take votes using the poll feature of their electronic platform, though a challenge with that option is allowing for votes of members who do not have online access, as well as dealing with the problem of multiple voting members participating from one location.

If any member calls for a secret ballot or for division of the house, or if your constitution and bylaws require a written ballot for certain kinds of votes (such as calling a pastor), you might have a sign-in list of those present at the meeting, then allow a certain period of time for people to come to the church to drop off their ballot. If you are in an area where travel is being restricted, or if there are voting members who are on lockdown, you may have to look at other options, however.

Whatever you choose to do, you must comply with state laws, and you must allow for all voting members to be able to cast their vote.