



THE ATLANTIC DISTRICT
of the LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

ENGAGING THE WORLD WITH THE GOSPEL OF HOPE!

Concerning Corporate Worship in Light of COVID-19

- Some Guidance from the Atlantic District -

Disclaimer

This guidance is offered to Atlantic District congregations and other associated ministries. It is based on our current understanding of the reopening phases of our communities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we continue to receive updates and more information about the COVID-19 pandemic we will strive to update this document as necessary. All congregations must implement a reopening plan for the particular context in which they are based. This must take into consideration all federal, state and local guidance.

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Concerning Corporate Worship in Light of COVID-19**

Introduction

We are living in an uncertain unprecedented time. The response to Covid-19 has placed a “pause” on so many parts of our lives. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) “the virus that causes COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly from person to person, mainly through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Spread is more likely when people are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet)” (April 22, 2020). COVID-19 has caused a very real risk to the health and safety of our communities. Our response continues to affect the ways we offer pastoral care and corporate worship.

The Atlantic District expects congregations to follow all federal, state and local government laws and orders as the re-opening phases in New York State (NYS) begin. The government has already shared that the phases will come at a minimum of 14 days apart and perhaps longer depending on what occurs with infection rates.

This document is designed to assist congregations in preparing a Return to Operations (RTO) Plan. The RTO plan helps each congregation prepare for a return to corporate worship in a responsible way, following applicable guidelines while maintaining the safety of all people. The RTO plan will need to be adjusted as we progress through different phases of reopening and public activities resume.

An exact time table for a return to public corporate worship is unknown. The situation in NYS is fluid and if a resurgence of the virus occurs, physical corporate worship in the sanctuary may need to return to a digital format for a time. Each congregation’s timetable for reopening may be different according to local/regional guidance.

The RTO plan is an important tool in considering a return to corporate worship in the sanctuary. The Atlantic District stands ready to assist you in answering questions and thinking through RTO plans.

In all these things our faith and confidence remain in our Lord as we seek His Kingdom and His righteousness.

A Note about Physical Distancing

Although the term “social distancing” is used by many people, “physical distancing,” may be a more helpful term to describe how to prevent the further spread of COVID-19.

Physical distancing calls for avoiding “close contact” with those outside one’s household. “Close contact” generally means avoiding being within 6 feet of another person.

Certain necessary tasks (e.g., receiving medical care, purchasing food, visiting a pharmacy, working in an essential business) may require that one come closer than 6 feet to others for brief periods. Corporate worship is important for the faithful in the midst of a pandemic, and so the same guidelines apply: one should generally try to avoid being within 6 feet of others. Given how the virus is thought to spread (principally via respiratory droplets from sneezes and coughs), this risk is lower for brief encounters than in cases of prolonged contact.

Preparing a Return to Operations (RTO) Plan

As congregations prepare an RTO plan it is important to prepare parishioners. In regular communications with people, it is important to ask and recognize fears, concerns and joys as each person contemplates a return to corporate worship. Some helpful questions may be:

- What worries you the most?
- What is your greatest concern?
- Are you comfortable at this time coming back into the church building?
- What do we need to do to help you feel safe coming into the sanctuary for corporate worship?
- What are you looking most forward to and/or excited about when we get back together?

NYS outlined new safety precautions that must be put in place upon re-opening a facility in light of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to help lower the risk of spreading the virus. While these guidelines are for businesses, they apply to all places of assembly as well. These guidelines are:

- Adjust hours and shift design as necessary to reduce density in a facility;
- Enact social distancing protocols;
- Restrict non-essential travel;
- Require all to wear masks if in frequent contact with others;
- Implement strict cleaning and sanitation standards;
- Enact a continuous health screening process for individuals to enter the facility;
- Continue tracing, tracking and reporting of cases; and
- Develop liability processes.

These NYS guidelines **must** be considered as we prepare our congregations for a return to public worship.

Some Considerations for Developing an RTO Plan

As the RTO plan is developed there are a number of questions and considerations that must be deliberated.

- **Your Health**

If you have been ill or been exposed to COVID-19, you should not be leading any part of the worship service in person.

- **Pastor's Role**

You are an example to the flock and should follow all the guidelines you are asking worship participants to follow. Anyone else participating in the worship service should also be following the guidelines and maintaining social distancing throughout the worship service.

- **Health Screenings**

- Business are required to perform health screenings.
- Will you ask people health questions as they enter the building?
 - Have you shown any symptoms of COVID-19 in the last 2 weeks?
 - Symptoms include: Cough, Shortness of Breath, Fever, Chills, Sore Throat, New loss of taste or smell. You may see [CDC COVID-19 symptoms](#).
 - Have you been exposed to anyone who has tested positive to COVID-19 in the last 2 weeks?
- Will you utilize an IR Thermometer to check temperatures?

- **Masks/Face Coverings & Other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

- For the purpose of this document, "PPE" refers to a personal mask and disposable gloves. It is prudent for the congregation to have a supply of PPE available for those entering the building. This may include homemade or disposable masks, gloves, and the ability for handwashing.
- All attending corporate worship should be reminded to bring their own PPE, but having a supply at church is helpful as well.
- All attending corporate worship should wear cloth face coverings when in public and when coming to church. Surgical masks or N-95 respirators are not necessary. You may see [CDC recommendations on face coverings](#).

- **Handwashing Stations**

Handwashing stations should be provided at the entrances and exits of the building. They provide an opportunity for people to protect themselves, others and the physical space. This could be as simple as hand sanitizer on a table for people to use, a stand-alone dispenser or wall mounted dispenser. Encourage those who enter the building to perform proper hand hygiene.

- **Cleaning Procedures**

All spaces in the church where people have gone (including sanctuary, bathrooms, doorknobs, etc.) will need to be sanitized after use. You may see [CDC recommendations on cleaning your facility](#). This will need to be implemented until advised otherwise:

- Regularly clean and disinfect commonly touched surfaces in the church.
- All hymnals should be removed and stored
- The church should have a supply of disposable gloves for those who are cleaning.
- Pews should be cleaned after each sitting. To maintain 6 feet of physical distance between people, block off at least 2 rows of pews between each pew that is used. All the pews should be disinfected after each sitting. Please remember that when one sits in a pew, often one reaches out and touches the pew in front, so it also needs to be cleaned.

- **Signage**

- Place appropriate signage at all entrances to the building to indicate the rules being followed for physical distancing so people are aware of the measures the church is implementing.
- Signage from the CDC also can be posted so that people remember to follow the guidelines offered to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- There are some prototype signs in Appendix C.

- **Worship Services**

- In the first phases of RTO a spoken Service of the Word without singing may be considered. This may alleviate concerns and issues with face coverings.
- Encourage those who are at higher risk from COVID-19 (i.e. those who are older or who have underlying health conditions) to remain at home. As circumstances allow, individual visits to these people may be possible.
- Worship services should be limited in attendance, depending on the guidance of public health authorities. The number of people permissible will vary depending on the regulations in effect by the government.
- Because of this, worship services may be scheduled with greater frequency. Attendance could be on a “first-come first-served” basis or organized by another system (a rotation system based on the first letter of last names, an online ticketing system like Eventbrite, signupgenius.com, etc.). A volunteer could be utilized to oversee the signup process.
 - How many smaller services can you offer in one day?
 - Could offering worship services on days besides Sunday help with capacity?
 - How are you going to make sure you do not go over attendance capacity?
- “Drive-in” or outdoor worship services are possible. If this is done, the worship service is celebrated in a location visible to the faithful who remain in their cars. For example, worship service could be celebrated on the front steps of a church, or in a church parking lot (perhaps on a platform erected for this purpose). Such events do not constitute gatherings of more than 10 persons, if the attendees remain in their cars.

- **Ushers**

Well-trained ushers can assist in making sure that people are following established government and congregational guidelines. Ushers should follow established guidelines and use appropriate PPE. For example, ushers may make sure that the attendees remain 6 feet apart from each other while entering and exiting; may direct people to handwashing stations; health screenings; and assist in proper physical distancing with seating. It is important that we help people understand the established guidelines and treat people with respect. This is a learning process for all of us.

- **Strict Physical Distancing**

- Those coming to church should maintain a 6-foot distance from each other at all times. Using painter's tape to close off pews or rows of seating in church can assist visually so that only every third row of seats would be open for seating.
- Members of a single household do not need to practice physical distancing with each other and so may sit together in the same row. (For example, if a group arrived in a single private vehicle, they could sit together.)
- In areas in which the attendees might stand in line, place tape on the floor to indicate proper spacing between persons.
- If all the available spaces for seating are filled, do not admit additional people to the church building, but have people wait until an additional seating opportunity for people may be offered.
- Encourage those who attend to maintain physical distancing everywhere on the church property (on the church steps, in the parking lot, etc.).

- **Entering and Exiting the Building**

The flow of entering and exiting the building needs to be considered for the sanctuary. One entrance to enter and another to exit establishes a clear flow of foot traffic and maintains appropriate physical distancing. The exit of those attending a worship service from the sanctuary could be conducted pew by pew to maintain appropriate distancing.

If the sanctuary does not allow for a separate entrance and exit, time must be allocated allowing all attendees to maintain physical distancing.

- **Offerings**

- An offering plate at the entrance and exit of the sanctuary allows people to offer their gifts as they pass. This area should be cleaned after each service. Physical passing of an offering plate should be discouraged while offering plates at entrances are used instead.
- Counters of offerings should wash their hands before and after counting the offering in addition to using disposable gloves.
- Parishioners can also be encouraged to give electronically.

- **Projection**

The use of visual projection devices can eliminate the use of bulletins and hymnals, decreasing the number of items that would need to be sanitized for worship services.

- **Bulletins**

- These could be placed in appropriate seats prior to a worship service by someone who has done appropriate hand hygiene.
- At the end of the worship service, people should be encouraged to take the bulletin home with them or dispose of it in the appropriate and clearly labeled receptacles near the exit of the building.
- Bulletins should not be reused nor handed to others at the end of the worship service.

- **Sharing of the Peace -**

Eye contact and a visual sign of peace using either two fingers, American Sign Language, or other means can be used instead of other practices employed prior to the pandemic. Hugging and handshaking, for example, should be avoided.

- **Choirs**

As vigorous singing in close proximity to others may increase the risk of the virus' spread and as choirs often stand close together in order to sing, choirs should be encouraged to wait until the rules for physical distancing are lifted.

- **Praise Bands and Musical Ensembles**

- If praise bands and/or musical ensembles are employed, each participant should practice strict physical distancing at all times.
- Participants should not share microphones, music stands, musical instruments, or other equipment.
- Hand sanitizing stations should be nearby so that participant may perform proper hand hygiene.

- **Social Hour/Coffee Hour**

Although discouraged during the early phases of the return to corporate worship, people may meet with each other while maintaining appropriate physical distancing. Offering drinks, food on trays, and the like are discouraged during the early phases of return to corporate worship as it is difficult to maintain hygiene and appropriate physical distancing.

- **Holy Communion**

The reception of the Lord's Supper is important as part of corporate worship. There are various factors that must be considered as one follows the guidelines from the CDC and NYS. Appendix B offers a number of considerations.

Conclusion

"I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5 ESV). Thankfully, our merciful Lord Jesus does not abandon us in times of pandemics. Thankfully, He forgives us even when we do not know what we are doing. Thankfully, He heals us and restores us all according to His grace. As we return to corporate worship, we do the best we can in our contexts to be faithful to our Lord who remains faithful to us while we endeavor to do what is best to serve and protect His people.

Appendix A

Return to Operations (RTO) Principles Template

Return to Operations Principles

These principles apply across the entire congregation. They are not at the discretion of individuals, ministry teams, or others. They have been enacted by our parish leadership for the safety and protection of everyone. They apply through all phases of the RTO process.

- **We Believe in God.**

As the Holy Spirit has called us to faith in Christ Jesus, we believe in God and serve Him. As we do, we use the gifts He has given us and whatever we do in word or in deed, we do in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

- **We Strive to Protect All.**

The protection of all who come to worship is a top priority. We encourage anyone who has underlying health concerns to remain home until the issues with the pandemic have improved. Providing for the spiritual needs of all remains our goal, including the offering of digital worship services for those who are unable to attend.

- **We Acknowledge a Phase-Based Approach.**

Employees and parishioners will be invited to return in phases, influenced by factors outlined below. Employees and Parishioners who return may need to work/worship from home for periods of time depending on applicable government orders or personal factors.

- **We Comply with Government Directives.**

RTO is driven by the status of applicable shelter-in-place/stay-at-home orders and the phased return described by the government of NYS. Some activities in our congregation may begin earlier while others may be delayed. This will be determined based on government guidelines and directives from the parish leadership.

- **We Follow the Advice of the CDC.**

We will continue to follow the guidelines issued by the CDC. This is for the safety and protection of all.

- **We Observe Physical Distancing Measures.**

We expect physical distancing measures to be followed.

- **We Use Personal Face Coverings and Other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).**

We ask all who come for worship, activities, or work to use a personal mask and other personal protective equipment as necessary in conjunction with the requirements outlined by NYS and the CDC.

- **We Support Individual Specific Needs**

Even if the church office is open and operating consistent with CDC guidelines, certain employees, volunteers, or members may not be able to return to office work, normal volunteer activities, or worship.

We support the needs of everyone and we shall work with people who have a legitimate need to remain at home due to health risk factors, lack of childcare, etc.

- **We Treat Everyone with Respect**

We take accountability for our own actions and treat each other with respect. We do not need to be policing others and their personal social distancing measures upon return to the office/church.

- **We Practice Good Hygiene.**

- We wash hands vigorously with soap and water or use hand sanitizer for at least 20 seconds.
- We avoid touching our faces.
- We use a face covering when in public.
- We stay at home when we are not feeling well. We come to church only when we are asymptomatic (no fever, cough, or feeling ill) for the last 14 days. We also stay home for 14 days when we have been exposed to the virus.

Specific Items of Note at _____ Lutheran Church

(List items indicated in the considerations given and other items or practices specific to your location.)

Appendix B

Some Considerations with Respect to Holy Communion

Any considerations offered are cognizant both of the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic and the attempt to prevent present and future liturgical abuse. It is important to remember the variety of practices of congregations of the Atlantic District as they seek to celebrate the Lord's Supper with reverence and respect. All considerations are offered in obedience to our Lord, in agreement with the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

Thanks is offered to the Thomistic Institute that has produced information by a working group of experts in the field who strive to follow the World Health Organization (WHO) and CDC guidelines for worship <https://thomisticinstitute.org/covid-sacraments>. What follows are considerations gleaned from their work and from others in the Church in addition to the CDC and the guidelines of NYS.

For the Congregation in General:

Gathering after a pandemic while still practicing physical distancing, many practices will be different temporarily. It is important that these practices do not lead to present or future liturgical abuse and do not foster fear or distrust among those who are gathered.

Congregations that receive the Lord's Supper at a communion rail may consider the distribution in a continuous line. This would avoid a need to sanitize a communion rail between each table assembled. If a rail is used, a person or team would need to be designated to disinfect every surface touched by those who knelt previously before the next people are invited to kneel.

Hand sanitizer should be made available for all who are distributing the Lord's Supper so that people are able to perform hand hygiene.

In the early phases of the return to corporate worship, consideration could be given to distributing the Lord's Supper at the very end of a worship service so that communicants may leave the building immediately after the reception of the Lord's Supper. In later stages of the return to corporate worship, the distribution of the Lord's Supper could occur when it normally does in a worship service.

Generally, people should avoid being within 6 feet of others, but where necessary, a momentary interaction presents an acceptable risk, especially if other precautions are taken.

For Pastors and Assistants:

At a suitable time during worship, the pastor should explain that those who desire to receive Holy Communion may do so describing how that will be done that day. In the early phases of the return to corporate worship, this verbal description is important especially since regulations from NYS may change and congregations may revise their practices.

The Pastor and any assistants should perform hand hygiene (e.g., with hand sanitizer) immediately before distributing Holy Communion. Hand hygiene is effective against the virus. In these

circumstances, gloves are not needed to be worn by the pastor or assistants if they perform proper hand hygiene.

In the early phases of the return to corporate worship, the Pastor may conclude the worship service before distributing the Lord's Supper and removing the chasuble but wearing an alb and stole (which can be more easily laundered). The Pastor should wear a face covering and distribute from a table by the exit door. The table would have an unfolded corporal and hand sanitizer as communicants receive the Lord's Supper and then leave the building.

When blessing non-communicants (like children), avoid placing a hand directly on the person.

In later phases of the return to corporate worship, the Pastor and assistants may distribute the Lord's Supper during a worship service in a continuous fashion.

For the Reception of the Lord's Body:

It is encouraged in the early phases of the return to corporate worship all receiving the Lord's Body do so in an outstretched hand.

If the pastor senses that his fingers have made contact with a person's hands or mouth, he should pause, place the ciborium on the corporal, and use hand sanitizer. He may repeat this process as often as he judges necessary during the distribution of Holy Communion. It is not necessary, however, for him to use hand sanitizer between each communicant, unless he makes actual physical contact with a communicant.

Communion on the tongue vs. in the hand: Opinions on this point are varied within the medical and scientific community: some believe Communion on the tongue involves an elevated and, in the light of all the circumstances, an unreasonable risk; others disagree. If Communion on the tongue is provided, one could consider using hand sanitizer after each communicant who receives on the tongue.

For the Reception of the Lord's Blood:

The Blood of Christ can be distributed through the use of individual cups or another method, taking into account the safety and protection of all involved. It is encouraged in the early phases of the return to corporate worship all receiving the Lord's Blood do so from an individual cup. This can be accomplished by blessing a single chalice and then pouring into individual cups.

Cross-contamination would be minimized if the glasses were placed far apart from each other on a table from which the faithful picked up a glass without touching any other glasses (as opposed to allowing the faithful to pick up glasses from an individual cup tray as they might do in other circumstances). Those who are assisting would make sure that an adequate number of glasses are available in a separated fashion throughout the distribution of the Lord's Supper.

Obviously, the cups from which people have received the Blood of Christ should not be discarded carelessly after Holy Communion but attended to with reverence.

There are also commercial pre-packaged communion kits (bread and wine individually wrapped) available.

For those congregations who continue to receive the Lord's Blood from a chalice they should follow these practices.

- Wine with a high alcohol content (20 percent) should be used.
- Multiple purificators should be used so that parts of the purificator are not reused from communicant to communicant.
- A sterling silver chalice should be used for distribution.

Drive-in or Drive-up Services of Holy Communion:

In cases where the faithful are in their cars, the communicants should get out of their cars to receive Holy Communion, one car at a time. This is preferable from a public health perspective because it permits the pastor (wearing a face covering) to stand next to a hand sanitizing station (a table with corporal and hand sanitizer, as described above) and thus gives him the ability to sanitize his hands after each recipient receives Holy Communion, if necessary. If the pastor walks from car to car or from window to window, proper hand hygiene could be difficult to maintain.

Additional Communion Considerations:

As restrictions are eased for public gatherings special seating should be provided for any who are at higher risk. This area could be clearly designated. Encourage those who are at higher risk from COVID-19 (i.e. those who are older or who have underlying health conditions) to sit in special seating when they come to church, and to continue to practice physical distancing.

Appendix C

Signage Ideas in Light of COVID-19

Welcome to _____ Church!!!!

What a blessing it is to be together!

We are committed to providing a safe environment for all.

Based on the guidelines provided by the CDC our church is requiring anyone who enters the building to:

- Wear a mask
- Observe 6 feet of physical distance between people
- Be feeling healthy
- Be without symptoms for the last 14 days (including fever)
- Have not been exposed to anyone carrying the virus in the last 14 days
- Wash your hands upon entrance

There are masks, gloves and hand washing stations available for you.

In obedience to our Lord and the elected officials who are His servants to whom we
are called to submit and obey,

there are no in-person worship services until further notice

so that we may help stop the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus.

If you did not receive this information by e-mail, please let us know by contacting the Parish Office at office@redeemerlutheranbronx.org or
calling 718.324.1288 to be included in our parish e-mail list. Our Lord bless and keep you.



Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church

A Parish of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod where “God’s People Pray.”
Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, by God’s grace, is a praying community of service
that receives, teaches, celebrates and shares Christ Jesus.

Dcs. Raquel A Rojas, Deaconess The Rev. Dr. Dien Ashley Taylor, Pastor

Symptoms of Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Your symptoms can include the following:

Fever



If you have COVID-19, you may have mild (or no symptoms) to severe illness.

Symptoms can appear 2-14 days after you are exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19.

Cough



Seek medical attention immediately if you or someone you love has **emergency warning signs**, including:

- Trouble breathing
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
- New confusion or not able to be woken
- Bluish lips or face

Shortness of breath



This list is not all inclusive. Please consult your medical provider for any other symptoms that are severe or concerning.



Share facts about COVID-19

Know the facts about coronavirus (COVID-19) and help stop the spread of rumors.

**FACT
1**

Diseases can make anyone sick regardless of their race or ethnicity.

Fear and anxiety about COVID-19 can cause people to avoid or reject others even though they are not at risk for spreading the virus.

**FACT
2**

For most people, the immediate risk of becoming seriously ill from the virus that causes COVID-19 is thought to be low.

Older adults and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions may be at higher risk for more serious complications from COVID-19.

**FACT
3**

Someone who has completed quarantine or has been released from isolation does not pose a risk of infection to other people.

For up-to-date information, visit CDC's coronavirus disease 2019 web page.

**FACT
4**

There are simple things you can do to help keep yourself and others healthy.

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; going to the bathroom; and before eating or preparing food.
- When in public, wear a cloth face covering that covers your mouth and nose.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.

**FACT
5**

You can help stop COVID-19 by knowing the signs and symptoms, which can include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath

Seek medical attention immediately if you or someone you love has emergency warning signs, including:

- Trouble breathing
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
- New confusion or not able to be woken
- Bluish lips or face

This list is not all inclusive. Please consult your medical provider for any other symptoms that are severe or concerning.



CS 316439-A 04/14/2020

cdc.gov/coronavirus

Appendix D

Additions After Publication

This appendix provides a listing of additions to the document since publication on May 9, 2020.

Appendix B - under For Pastors and Assistants - added 05/10/2020

When blessing non-communicants (like children), avoid placing a hand directly on the person.