

Guidelines for Returning to Gathering In-Person in our Congregations

From Bishop Aitken, for our synod congregations
Based on shared information among ELCA Bishops

When can we return to in person worship?

First it is important to state that just because we may be able to meet together as restrictions are gradually lifted doesn't mean we must. We encourage congregational leadership to take the time necessary to carefully assess their local context and to intentionally create a plan. The decision to return to in-person group worship should be made by the pastor and council together, in thoughtful paying care attention to the following:

- The safety of the congregation and the wider community
- Recommendations from the CDC and MN Health Department
- Consultation with the congregation's insurance carrier
- Federal Guidelines for a three-phase re-opening (CDC)

Large gatherings are the most dangerous venue for a community-wide viral outbreak. Congregations must be responsible and helpful members of their whole community, both inside and outside their own churches. Resuming in-person worship will need to happen in phases.

What are the three phases and how do they guide life together in congregations?

The Federal document [Guidelines for Opening up America Again](#) explains the phases reopening of businesses. Before proceeding to these phases, the document says the following gating criteria should be met, in order to mitigate against resurgence and protect the most vulnerable.

- 14 days of declining symptoms
- 14 days of declining cases
- Hospitals able to treat all patients without crisis-care
- Robust testing (including emerging antibody-testing) in place for at-risk-health care workers

When all the above mentioned criteria are true for your region, then elected officials and health experts will begin with phase one: In all phases, good hygiene practices like washing hands and wearing masks in public are strongly encouraged. People who feel sick should stay at home, not go to work or to school. Social distancing will be important for the foreseeable future. Here the guidelines for each phases which will influence life I our congregations.

Phase 1 – For states and regions with 14 days of declining cases

- schools, daycare, and organized youth activities stay closed.
- Large venues like **churches**, movie theaters, ball parks and areas may reopen, but observing strict social distancing protocols.
- Return to work in phases. Close common areas at work where people gather.
- Avoid non-essential travel

Phase 1 in your Congregation: Once your county or municipality has had 14 days of declining cases, you may resume in person worship, weddings while practicing extreme hygiene and strict social distancing protocols (e.g. sitting every – other pew, six feet apart, no handshakes, no passing of the peace, etc.) The fellowship hall/gathering space should remain closed. Continue to strongly discourage vulnerable individuals from attending. No visits to hospitals or senior care facilities. No schools or youth activities. Encourage church staff to work from home as much as possible. Fellowship activities are still suspended. Stay in phone contact with seniors and homebound members of your congregation and community. Additional recommendations for social distancing at church, along with some liturgical recommendations for the first Sunday back are include in an accompanying document, *Returning to the Sanctuary: Worship Resources*.

Phase 2 – For states and regions with no evidence of a rebound and who satisfy the gating criteria for a second time

-All vulnerable populations continue to shelter in place. All people should continue to maximize physical distance in public.

- Non-essential travel may resume.
- Employers should continue to encourage telecommuting and keep common areas closed.
- Schools, daycare, camps and organized youth activities may resume.
- Visits to senior care facilities and hospitals remain prohibited.
- Large venues (sit-down dining, movie theaters and **churches**) can operate with *moderate* social distancing protocols.

Phase 2 in your Congregation: Once your county/municipality has had **28 days** of declining cases without resurgence, you may resume in-person worship, weddings and funerals with *moderate* social distancing protocols. Strongly discourage vulnerable individuals from attending. No visits to hospitals or senior care facilities. Schools, camps and organized youth activities may resume with social distancing. Continue to encourage church staff to work from home when possible. Fellowship hour and activities may resume with maximum social distancing and proper food safety protocols. Stay in phone contact with seniors and homebound members of your congregation and community.

Phase 3 – For states and regions with no evidence of a rebound and who satisfy the gating criteria for a third time

- Vulnerable individuals can resume public interactions but should observe physical distancing.
- High risk individuals should minimize time in crowded environments.
- Worksites may now resume without restrictions.
- Visits to senior care facilities and hospitals may resume, remaining diligent with hygiene.
- Large venues (sit-down dining, movie theaters, and **churches**) can operate with *limited* social distancing protocols.

Phase 3 in your Congregation: Once your county/municipality has had **42 days** of declining cases without resurgence, you may resume in-person worship, weddings and funerals with *limited* social distancing protocols. Strongly discourage vulnerable individuals from attending. Visits to hospitals and senior care facilities may resume with great care. Schools, daycare, or youth activities may resume with limited social distancing. Church staff may work without restrictions. Fellowship may resume with limited social distancing. Resume homebound communion.

I am hearing from our Deans, rostered ministers and other leaders that good things are actually coming out as a result of the forced new way to do ministry. This has helped us all return to an intentionality that can bear good fruit for the future of the church. Priorities are being re-examined, greater clarity about what the Body of Christ was supposed to be all along is happening. Less vital traditions are being questioned in new ways, and vital ministry is taking a new focus. It is important that we pause and reflect on what has been learned during this time of leave-taking and to keep alert for mission opportunities that might have arisen out of this challenge as well: Some questions to ponder:

-
- What have you learned during this time when you were unable to gather in-person?
 - What unexpected opportunities have arisen?
 - As you move forward out of this time, what do you sense the priorities of ministry should be?
 - What do you sense will/could/should change for your community moving forward?

There are no hard and fast dates to give you by which you can safely re-open. It is vital that you stay tuned in to your local/county conditions. As many of you have, continue to consider coordinating decisions with close by congregations. As always, it is our love of neighbor that guides us. If, as you ponder specific dates for resuming in-person gatherings, you find yourselves having significant reservations—that may be a sign that it's too early. Please err on the side of caution. Thank you for your faithful leadership, and do not hesitate to contact your synod office with questions or concerns.

+Bishop Thomas M. Aitken
Northeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA