

COVID-19 Response Guidelines

for the Episcopal Diocese of Central New York

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Recent Updates

These guidelines will be updated, and parish leaders notified, as necessary. These guidelines are effective as of **November 29, 2020** and will remain in place until further notice. It is possible that suspension of indoor in-person gatherings will continue through Easter. Diocesan leaders are monitoring [COVID-19 positivity rates](#) in the Diocese and other factors. Highlights of current guidelines:

- Indoor in-person gatherings are suspended.
- Live-streaming and recording worship from within the church is permitted.
- Outdoor and “drive-in” gatherings, with Holy Eucharist, are permitted.
- Essential community outreach ministries continue.

Overview

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, God is calling Central New York Episcopalians to live into our shared vision of a **world healed by love**. These guidelines outline how we will care for our communities and one another through our faithful response to the pandemic.

The goals of Episcopalians in Central New York include:

- Sharing God's love and hope with our communities in this uncertain time.
- Keeping Jesus' command to "remember the least of these"—the most vulnerable members of our community--by doing all we can to slow the spread of infectious disease.
- Continuing to provide people with the very best pastoral care now and in the months to come.
- Continuing prayer, worship, and formation, whether gathered in-person or online.
- Continuing community outreach ministries safely.

What the way forward looks like:

- **Careful and cautious:** The population of the Episcopal Church in Central New York has a higher median age than the general population of Central New York and therefore a higher proportion of people who are especially vulnerable to COVID-19. Therefore, the churches of the Diocese of CNY will host in-person gatherings and open our buildings for use more slowly and cautiously than required by the government.
- **Inclusive:** To ensure the safety and inclusion of people who may not be able to return to in-person worship and gatherings, we strongly encourage the continuation of online worship, formation, and pastoral care.
- **Transformative:** We do not expect a "return to normal," but rather that God is already doing a new thing in the midst of this crisis. As we learn to love God, one another, and all creation in these changing circumstances, our churches will be transformed.

Current Guidelines

Gatherings

- Indoor in-person gatherings are suspended as of November 29, 2020.
- Vestries and other groups should meet by phone or online conference.
- Online worship and formation is strongly encouraged.
- Outdoor in-person gatherings for worship are permitted, as are “drive-in” gatherings, provided the Covenant for Outdoor Gatherings is in place (See [Appendix A](#)). Masks and a minimum of 6 feet of distance between household parties are required at all outdoor in-person gatherings. Please observe appropriate hygiene practices.
- Holy Communion (bread only) may be offered at outdoor and “drive-in” worship gatherings, and to worship leaders at live-streamed and recorded services. For detailed guidelines on celebration of Holy Eucharist, please see “Liturgy” below.
- Live Streaming and Recording:
 - Up to 6 worship leaders (limited to those serving) are permitted to gather in church buildings for the purpose of recording or live streaming services, provided that masks are worn, physical distance is maintained, and appropriate hygiene is followed.
 - For singing during live streaming or recording, please see “liturgy” below.
 - Please know all gatherings involve risk. All worship leaders involved in recording or live streaming are encouraged to follow their conscience when deciding whether or not to participate in person.

Liturgy

- The Peace: Because physical contact and proximity are prohibited, all individuals remain in place for the passing of the peace. Parish leaders are encouraged to model safe greetings with creativity from their places including bows and waves.
- The Eucharist may be celebrated and Communion may be distributed in one kind only, the Bread.
 - Eucharist “to go” (distributing bread without participation in a community Eucharist) and “Virtual Communion” (such as a minister “blessing” bread and wine through a phone or internet connection) are prohibited.
 - The celebrant will use appropriate hygiene and wear masks when celebrating the Eucharist.
 - The celebrant will maintain physical distance from parishioners to the extent possible during the distribution of Communion. We recommend considerations to reduce physical contact during the distribution of Communion including use of tongs or disposable cups or plates.

- Communicants will keep masks on when receiving Communion. Each communicant should return to their seat/place/car before removing their mask briefly to consume the Host.
- Singing is prohibited, except by one person per service who maintains at least 15 feet of physical distance from all others. It is strongly recommended, but not required, that the soloist wear a mask. Participants should be informed in advance that singing, which poses a greater risk of viral transmission, will be part of the service.
- The preacher may remove their mask only when preaching.
- No offering plate may be passed. Gifts may be collected online or in containers placed at entry points.
- Consider offering digital worship materials that can be viewed on personal devices.

Pastoral offices

- In-person pastoral visits may be considered at the discretion of the clergy and the person to be visited.
- Funerals:
 - Funerals may take place in the church building (a Covenant for Building Use must be in place, see [Appendix A](#)). Up to 10 individuals may be present in addition to individuals present for liturgy or technical support (see live streaming/recording guidelines). Masks, six feet of physical distance, and appropriate hygiene are required. If a single cantor sings at a funeral service in a church building, they must wear a mask.
 - Funerals taking place at graveside or in funeral homes should follow guidelines established by those locations, in addition to any guidelines deemed necessary by officiating clergy.
- Baptisms:
 - Baptism is a sacrament most appropriately celebrated in the context of a church community.
 - Baptisms may take place in the church building (a Covenant for Building Use must be in place, see [Appendix A](#)). Up to 10 individuals may be present in addition to individuals present for liturgy or technical support (see live streaming/recording guidelines). Masks, six feet of physical distance, and appropriate hygiene are required. If a single cantor sings at a baptism in a church building, they must wear a mask.
- Weddings:
 - Weddings may take place in the church building (a Covenant for Building Use must be in place, see [Appendix A](#)). Up to 10 individuals may be present in addition to individuals present for liturgy or technical support (see live streaming/recording guidelines). Masks, six feet of physical distance, and appropriate hygiene are required. If a single cantor sings at a wedding in a church building, they must wear a mask.

- Weddings taking place at other venues should follow guidelines established by those locations, in addition to any guidelines deemed necessary by officiating clergy.

Community outreach ministries

- Twelve-step meetings should be moved to online alternatives wherever possible. Should your church continue to host in-person twelve-step groups, a maximum of 10 individuals may be present. Participants must wear masks, maintain six feet of physical distance, and follow appropriate hygiene practices.
- Essential ministries including food pantries and community meal programs are encouraged to continue operations. In most cases, a “to-go” distribution model will be appropriate. Please regularly check with your local health department and adhere to their guidance.

Building and office use

- Parish staff and volunteers may work in the parish office to perform essential duties. Minimize in-person presence in the church building as much as possible, and look for ways to work remotely. Please know that working in the church office/building involves risk. All staff and volunteers are encouraged to follow their conscience when deciding whether or not to work in the office/ building.
- Staff and volunteers in church buildings must follow all government regulations to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- When in use, the building should be regularly cleaned and disinfected. Please see [Appendix B](#) for cleaning guidance from the Diocesan Property Committee, New York State, and the CDC.

Appendix A: Covenants

Clergy and vestries of individual congregations must submit the Covenant for Gathering Anew to the bishop's office to request permission for in-person gatherings. There are two versions of the Covenant available:

1. [Covenant for Outdoor Gatherings only](#)
2. [Covenant for Building Use](#)

Once a congregation has an approved Covenant, they do not need to update that Covenant when diocesan guidelines change. Congregations with only a Covenant for Outdoor Gathering must complete a Covenant for Building Use for approval before returning to use of church buildings.

Appendix B: Resources

Diocesan guidelines and information

[Diocesan COVID-19 Resource Hub](#)

State and federal guidelines and information

[New York State COVID-19 Information Hub](#)

[New York State Interim Guidance for Religious & Funeral Services During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency](#)

Posters and print resources

[Print resources and posters](#) - CDC printables to share information about COVID-19

[NYS "Protect Yourself & Stop the Spread" poster](#)

Cleaning

[Cleaning Guidelines](#) for churches from the diocesan Property Committee

[New York State Department of Health Interim Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection of Public and Private Facilities for COVID-19](#)

[Cleaning your Facility](#) - CDC guide for building cleaning

[Sanitizing Office Spaces](#) - CDC guide for frequently used spaces

HVAC

[HVAC System Recommendations](#) for churches from the diocesan Property Committee

Thrift Shops

[Thrift Shops: Sample Covenant and NYS Safety Plan](#) from The Key, a ministry of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Cazenovia, New York