

**Answers to
Frequently Asked Questions
about Worship during the Pandemic.**

What religious teachings inform our bishop's decisions for regathering during the pandemic?

As Episcopalians, we rely on scripture, reason, and tradition to discern difficult decisions. Bishop Susan Goff turns to the gospel story recounted in Matthew 22, Mark 12, and Luke 10: the greatest commandment is to love God, and the second is like it: to love your neighbor as yourself. The gospel according to John takes this commandment further: Jesus instructs his disciples to love one another as Jesus has loved us (John 15:12). Moreover, we are to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). Bishop Goff draws on Jesus' words and acts of love and compassion for the most vulnerable among us, placing our own desires for worship and gathering second to the lives and health of others.

What reason (scientific information) informs our bishop's decisions?

The House of Bishops regularly meets with the nation's top doctors, such as Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Francis Collins (Director of the National Institutes of Health) for the latest medical science and advice. Based on those meetings and consultations with other health experts, each bishop diocesan decides what safety measures are appropriate for her or his diocese. Guidelines can vary from region to region or diocese to diocese because of the differences in the infection rates.

What tradition (polity) informs the bishop's authority over our parish?

Dioceses are geographic designations subject to the polity of the Episcopal Church. By the Canons of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Virginia, a bishop diocesan is elected by clergy and lay delegates. The bishop diocesan has jurisdiction over all things worship in their diocese and over all clergy; rectors and priests-in-charge are in charge of the worship in their parish. One of the ordination vows every clergy person takes is to be obedient to their bishop. Therefore, whether a rector, vestry, and parish agree with the bishop or not, clergy, and by extension the parish placed in their charge, are subject to the bishop's guidelines.

What does all that mean for us day-to-day?

Because COVID-19 is so novel and so little is known about how contagious it is, how it spreads, and what its long-term effects may be, the Diocese of Virginia is erring on the side of caution. We know that worship can be a super-spreader event and creates risks not only for those who attend worship but also people who did not choose to attend yet have contact with worshipers afterwards.

Our bishop is also taking into consideration the needs for non-COVID-19 patients: if a hospital is flooded with COVID-19 patients, the resources (beds, doctors, nurses, equipment) available for other kinds of patients, some of which are quite critical, are greatly reduced.

Additionally, our bishop is taking into consideration the physical safety of the clergy and staff of our diocese, many of whom are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 and may otherwise be pressured by vestries or congregants to engage in risky behavior.

One person who dies from COVID-19 due to exposure in an Episcopal church or by someone who worshiped in an Episcopal church is one too many.

When can we re-gather?

We know, we miss you too!! Re-gathering depends on each locality. Guidelines for re-gathering are based on public health markers.

- They take into consideration the public health markers of each locality. Refer to [this map](#): From the diocesan webpage: “Red or Orange codes mean the risk is still too high to regather. Green code means it is safe. If your locality is identified as Yellow, regathering will be permitted if the 7-day rolling average of new cases per 100,000 persons is 5 or under. If it is in the range of 5.1-9.9, it is not yet safe.”
- Currently we are in Phase I of IV -- no in-person worship or gathering permitted except under emergencies (such as emergency baptisms). Phase IV worship and gathering will likely look much like what we are accustomed to from pre-pandemic.
- Once an area is deemed safe for Phase II, re-gathering will follow safety protocols, including social distancing, required masks, no singing, etc. The full list of Phase II protocols can be found [here](#).

Why is Sunday worship Morning Prayer and not Holy Eucharist?

Episcopalians, like all Anglicans, understand the Sacraments (Baptism and Holy Eucharist) to be the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In other words, Jesus comes to us in physical and spiritual form because we are both physical and spiritual beings. As both Catholic and Reformed (or Protestant), we believe that Jesus is present to us both in the bread and wine AND in the people faithfully gathered. Because Jesus came to us physically (what we call the mystery of the incarnation), the re-gathering of the faithful in physical communal worship is not a secondary but a primary condition for the Holy Eucharist to be celebrated and shared. Removing the bread and wine from its physical, community-centred context as an ongoing norm deprives the Sacrament of part of its meaning, power, and spiritually nourishing effects: to re-member (bring together) the members of the Body of Christ.

In keeping with both the 1979 Book of Common Prayer and Protestant reformers, we believe that the primary Sunday worship service is the Holy Eucharist: Jesus Christ comes among us in the Word and Holy Communion. Though we are unable to gather for Holy Communion, we firmly believe we encounter Jesus Christ through the Word by the Holy Spirit, in Holy Scripture, sermons, and prayer. Therefore Morning Prayer, as part of the Daily Office, is more than appropriate for use in public worship on Sundays and in private.

Where can I learn quickly what is currently permitted by the bishop?

The Diocese of Virginia has a very helpful quick reference guide and more at <http://www.thediocese.net/news-and-events/covid-19-resources/>

How can I help?

The more we follow public health guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the sooner we all can move forward to a post-pandemic world. Get vaccinated when the vaccine is offered to you. Wear masks, respect social distancing, etc., as safety precautions and as a spiritual discipline to love your neighbor as yourself.

Remain connected in ways that are safe:

- Join us for our virtual worship, coffee hour and formation opportunities.
- Call fellow parishioners simply to check in on each other.
- Get involved with an outreach ministry or a small group like a Bible study.
- Join a House Church this Lent.
- Ask the clergy, staff and the vestry for more ways to help.

Most importantly, pray for St. James's, its leadership, clergy, staff and parishioners, and our bishops Susan, Jennifer, and Taylor.