

Covid-19 and Indoor Worship during Cold Weather

As the weather is changing, many of us are considering, or already are, worshipping inside a building.

Best practices say prior to moving indoors for worship (if that is the Session's action), churches should:

continue to follow guidance on cleaning and disinfecting, and physical distancing--this will probably mean fewer people in your worship space. If possible, provide alternate/virtual means to worship- zoom, YouTube, even audio recordings.

Research points towards the corona virus being picked up and spread through air systems- including air blown heat. Please see below for guidance.

From the CDC:

- o Establish and continue communication with local and State authorities to determine current mitigation levels in your community.
- o Protect staff and congregants who are at higher risk for severe illness encouraging use of options to participate virtually, if possible.
- o Continue to provide congregants with spiritual and emotional care and counseling on a flexible or virtual basis, or refer them to other available resources
- o Limit gatherings to those that can maintain social distancing and consider video streaming or drive-in options for vulnerable populations.
- o Encourage use of a cloth face covering at all gatherings and when in the building by everyone except children aged less than 2 years old. Not using a cloth face covering may also be appropriate at times for some individuals who have trouble breathing or need assistance to remove their mask.
- o Have adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors, including soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer), tissues, and no-touch trash cans.
- o Post signs on how to stop the spread of COVID-19 and promote everyday protective measures, such as washing hands and covering coughs and sneezes and properly wearing a face covering
- o NOTE- POSTING SIGNS REGARDING MASK USE, ETC, IS REQUIRED BY THE COMMONWEALTH OF VA
- o Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily and shared objects between use (door knobs/pew backs, etc.)
- o Avoid use of items that are not easily cleaned, sanitized, or disinfected.- this may include pew cushions, hymnals, offering plates, etc. (Many congregations have an offering plate for drop off, by the door for use when entering and leaving.)

Communion may be celebrated, if Session so approves- best practice says that whoever prepares the elements wears a mask and gloves, and that "single serving" packs be prepared for each communion participant- trays of elements are NOT passed through congregation, nor do participants come forward for intinction.

Individually packaged communion elements are available- Concordia Supply <https://www.concordiasupply.com/>- or others, like Cokesbury, etc.

- o Prior to re-convening worship in the sanctuary, the sanctuary should be cleaned and disinfected.
- o Ensure safe and correct application of disinfectants and keep them away from children.

- o Ensure that ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible by opening windows and doors, using fans, etc. Do not open windows and doors if they pose a safety risk to children using the facility .

Best practice says that air blown heat can spread the virus, even if people are wearing masks. Best practice is to heat the sanctuary prior to worship, (if air blown heat) and then to crack open doors/windows at both sides or entrances to the sanctuary, to promote good, clean air flow- this reduces the chance of the virus getting spread throughout the worship space. Yes, it will be chilly, but fresh air reduces the viral load and risk to congregants.

- o Limit the size of gatherings in accordance with the guidance and directives of state and local authorities.

- o Seating should be spaced 6' apart, and space should be marked off to show people where- and where not--to sit.

Family units (people residing in the same physical household) may sit together, but must be 6' apart from others.

- o Bulletins should be placed on the pews, not handed out by an usher. The passing of the peace should not include physical contact- not even elbow-bumping.

- o There should be clear "in" and "out" doors, and people should retain the 6' distance in entering and exiting.

While we know people love to sing, singing is one of the best ways to spread the virus. Hymns may be played, but singing is not advised. Some congregations permit humming or soft singing while wearing a mask.

Fellowship/lunches/coffee hour are not best practice. Conversations/visiting should take place outside, with appropriate distancing, rather than lingering in the sanctuary.

Some congregations have people taking temperatures at the door.

If the Session decides to reconvene in physical worship in the sanctuary, it must also have a plan for what to do if someone worshipping with the body has a positive covid test.

First- covid-19 is a reportable disease- contact the county health department, and comply by their guidance and instructions. When making an announcement about someone having a positive test, you should inform the members, but not mention names, unless you have the explicit permission of the person who has had the positive test.

Second- quarantine/close for as many days as the health department recommends- and clean and disinfect thoroughly.

A few congregations in our Presbytery have already gone through having to suspend in-person worship due to a worshipper who had a positive test for covid, as well as pastoral leaders who have contracted covid.

Also, think about what the school district and county are doing- is there a point at which the local cases are so high, that you will close? If so, what will that benchmark be? How will you communicate this to the congregation?

Friends, all of this is out of a concern for others. Jesus tells us that we are to love God, and love each other. Safe health practices are one way we live out that love.

If there are questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the Presbytery.