

Houses of Worship | Introduction

Overview

Since time immemorial, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and followers of other beliefs, have turned to their faith for deliverance from the scourge of disease. In John's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the Great Physician that delivers a sick man from the bondage of his affliction. In the Book of Exodus, the Lord is presented as the Healer who will put no disease upon those who diligently heed to his voice. In the Holy Quran, it is said that when the faithful is ill, it is Allah who cures. The Covid-19 public health crisis is no different. In this time of need, communities of all creed once again turn to their faith for solace.

It is thus only more pressing that we ensure that people's expression of faith are protected from the ravage of the pandemic. People presenting themselves to Houses of Worship for healing must not return home with the very ill from which they are seeking refuge. Yet, this is a painfully real threat. The elderly population are disproportionately represented among both attendees and Covid-19 patients. Megachurches, usually a manifestation of the strength of faith, have the potential to become sources of "super-spreaders", as illustrated alarmingly by the experience of Shincheonji megachurches in South Korea. And gospel singing, a beautiful expression of faith in normal times, could become a high-risk factor in a population already disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The threat to faith communities is real and pressing.

This public health threat takes nothing away from people's yearning for gathering with other members of their faith communities. If anything, the threat strengthens it. Indeed, in each other's company, devotees seek refuge, comfort and hope; from their faith leaders, they seek help, guidance and affirmation. Religion is by its very nature both an individual act and a group practice. For communities of all faiths, it is important to gather to worship. But these two interests, the yearning to gather and the public health imperative, cannot be diametrically opposed. For if the Bible, the Old Testament, the Quran and the holy texts of other faiths present a higher being as a healer, then surely expression of faith must be conducted in a manner that preserves the health of the faithful.

This set of guidelines seeks to carve a path forward between these two interests. It acknowledges people's fundamental right and need for Houses of Worship and allows a capacity constraint that is much higher than other institutions with a similar public health risk profile (e.g., movie theaters remain closed). It also acknowledges the public health imperative and strenuously recommends against high-risk practices (in a public health sense) such as singing. Faith leaders should recognize the public health expertise of the drafters of this document and implement these guidelines to the extent feasible. In the event they cannot open under all of the guidelines presented here, it is the strenuous recommendation of public health experts that they stay closed.

Just as all faiths heal the spirit, worship can take many forms and particular expression of religiosity have indeed changed over the millennia, sometimes in response to the exact same kind of public health crisis we are facing. The following pages thus also contain suggestions from experts in divinity studies on how Houses of Worship can continue to engage with their members without opening their (physical) doors.

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On May 29, 2020, Governor Lamont issued Executive Order No. 7TT which provides in Section 2.c.:

"Effective immediately, the 49-person limit on religious, spiritual and worship gatherings is raised for indoor gatherings to 25% of capacity of the indoor space or a maximum of 100 people, whichever is smaller, and to 150 people for outdoor gatherings, provided in each case that appropriate safety and social distancing measures shall be employed. For any such gathering where participants remain in vehicles with windows closed and at least six (6) feet of space between vehicles, there shall no numerical attendance limit, provided all other laws are complied with."

On October 8, 2020, Governor Lamont issued Executive Order 9F which provides:

1. Amendments to Size Restrictions on Certain Gatherings. Effective on October 8, 2020, Executive Order No. 7TT, Section 2 is amended to provide that religious, spiritual, or worship gatherings, if held indoors, are limited to no more than 50 percent of the building's capacity or a maximum of 200 people, whichever is lower, and such services, if held outdoors, are limited to the number of people that can be accommodated safely by the venue or location provided that all persons present wear masks, unless speaking from designated safe locations, and that a distance of 6 feet is maintained between all persons or groups not from the same household.

2. Extension of Drive-In Worship Services and Graduations. The provisions of Executive Order No. 7XX, Sections 1 and 2, regarding drive-in religious and graduation ceremonies, shall remain in effect."

These guidelines are intended to assist communities of faith who choose to gather in-person within the limitations set by the Executive Order, and to implement practices that best protect the health and safety of their congregants and the public. They were created through a collaborative effort between the clergy and health experts. Finally, these guidelines do not relieve one of any obligations to follow other orders, rules, laws and regulations.

Houses of Worship play a vital role in the fight against Covid-19. The public health expertise reflected in this set of guidelines will help them continue to serve their members while preserving the health of all.

Definitions

The following definitions are used in these guidelines:

At-risk population: The term refers to those with pre-existing or underlying conditions and persons age 65 or older, who are especially susceptible to Covid-19. Refer to CDC guidance here:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>

Family members: These are people who live in the same household. The term does not refer to those with blood relations but who do not live together.

Houses of Worship | Reopening processes

- **Plan for reopening:** Share these guidelines with all members of the clergy, volunteers, employees, and members of the House of Worship, and inform them of any additional specific measures being taken in response to Covid-19.
- **Program administrator:** Appoint a program administrator who is accountable for implementing these guidelines. The program administrator should be a member of the clergy or an employee, and should not be a volunteer.
- **Cleaning Plan:** Develop cleaning checklists that incorporate these guidelines. Ensure it is clear which employees and volunteers are responsible for implementing the plans.
- **Training:** Institute a training program and ensure employee's/volunteer's participation in the program. Training should include:
 - Guidelines contained in this document
 - Protocols on how to clean and use cleaning products (incl. disinfectants) safely
 - Additional guidance can be found here:
https://osha.washington.edu/sites/default/files/documents/FactSheet_Cleaning_Final_UWD_EOHS_0.pdf.

Note: If any on site duties are subcontracted, it is the responsibility of the House of Worship to ensure subcontractors have been appropriately trained.
- **Personal protection:** Estimate required personal protection and begin procuring.
- **Thorough cleaning:** If the House of Worship is not open yet, it is recommended to complete a thorough cleaning of facility prior to reopening, including but not limited to:
 - Bathrooms
 - Seating area
- **Capacity tracking:** the House of Worship should enforce the capacity limits set by **Executive Order No. 9F**.

Houses of Worship | Safe services

Alternative to in-person services

Practices in the section "alternatives to in-person services" are best practices of how Houses of Worship can continue to engage with their members while preserving the health of all.

Online services: consider streaming services online or pre-recording services, regardless of whether in-person services have resumed. Members at higher risk for Covid-19 are by far safer at home. Numerous resources exist on how to better serve members online by streaming sermons or pre-recording sermons.

Drive-in/parking lot service: consider giving services and offering services in the parking lot outside of the House of Worship with attendees staying inside their cars.

- Many houses of worship have used radio transmitters for drive-in service.
- Car windows should remain closed.
- A distance of 6 ft. should be maintained between cars. Alternatively, keep every other parking spot between cars empty.
- **Staying connected:** consider organizing group classes or holy text study groups virtually to offer members a way to stay connected while staying safe at home.
- **Pre-registration:** consider a web page for attendees to preregister for services. This allows the House of Worship to more effectively manage the capacity constraint.
- **Collecting contributions:** consider providing members with the option to contribute digitally.

In-person services

Public health experts do not recommend in-person services in this phase of the reopening. Should a House of Worship choose to offer in-person services, public health experts have suggested measures in the section "in-person services." While these suggestions are not rules, before rejecting them, faith leaders should pause and seriously consider the health consequences for at-risk devotees and for the broader community where the House of Worship is based.

- **At risk population:** It is strongly recommended that you dissuade this group from in-person services.
- **Attendee health check:** It is strongly recommended that attendees report their temperatures taken on the same day and be asked about signs of illness before being admitted for in person service.
 - Do not admit attendees with temperatures above 100.5 Fahrenheit or exhibit any symptoms for Covid-19 listed by the CDC.

Houses of Worship | Safe services

In-person services – continued

- **In-person services:** It is strongly recommended that you refrain from providing in-person services if your House of Worship is located in a heavily affected area. A map of confirmed cases by areas can be accessed here: <https://portal.ct.gov/coronavirus>
- **Encourage use of alternative services:** If both the aforementioned alternatives to in-person services and in-person services are offered, it is strongly recommended that houses of worship encourage members, especially at-risk population, to use the alternatives to in-person services.
 - It is strongly recommended that, in addition to signage requirement detailed below, that a member of the clergy, a greeter, an usher or a volunteer verbally deliver a public health word of caution to all members belonging to the at-risk population attending the in-person service.
 - It is strongly recommended that this word of caution feature prominently in any announcement of the church's reopen process and in any scheduling of in-person service.
 - A greeter could be tasked with screening attendees to in-person services for the sole purpose of verbally delivering the word of caution.
- **At risk population only services:** if a House of Worship chooses to hold in-person services and allow at-risk population to attend, it is strongly recommended that houses of worship hold at least one service reserved for at risk population.
 - Consider making this the first service after periodic thorough cleaning and disinfection of facilities have been performed.
 - Take additional measures to ensure the use of face coverings and physical distancing.
 - Take additional measures to ensure attendees do not congregate inside or in the parking lot.
- **Greeters:** it is strongly recommended that a greeter be posted at the entrance to enforce maximum capacity and to discourage the attendance of in-person service by at-risk population.
- **Ushers:** it is recommended that an usher guide attendees to their seats to enforce the 6 ft. distance between families and attendees, unless seats are clearly marked as use/non-use.
- **Nurseries:** It is recommended that Houses of Worship not offer nursery or children's House of Worship ministries.
 - If the House of Worship decides to keep nurseries open, follow CDC guidelines on childcare: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-childcare.html>
- **Singing during in-person services:** It is strongly recommended that Houses of Worship consider alternatives to singing. Singing during services creates a higher risk of spreading infectious particles.
- **Platform participation:** It is recommended that platform participation from the audience be suspended.

Houses of Worship | Safe services

In-person services – continued

- **Religious rituals:** all guidelines hereafter apply to all religious rituals.
 - E.g., the rule on maintaining 6 ft. distance outside of family members applies to rituals that might require attendees to hold hands. Non-family members may not hold hands.
 - People performing rituals are exempt from social distancing rule and the requirement to wear PPE when they perform one-on-one religious rituals, provided that the member of the clergy and the person receiving the ritual are socially distancing from everyone else. For example, a member of the clergy might baptize a person provided that everyone else is 6 ft. away.
- **Social distancing:** all people except members of the same family shall remain 6 ft. apart at all times.
- **Choir:** Suspend all activities related to the choir.
- **Singing during services:** if a House of Worship chooses to sing during service,
 - Everyone should continue to wear face coverings and maintain 6 ft. distance.
 - No common item such as microphone or prayer book may be shared during singing.
- **Platform participation:** If a House of Worship chooses to continue the practice of platform participation, the rule against sharing objects and the 6 ft. rule apply.
- **Youth services:** Suspend all in-person youth services including but not limited to Sunday schools.
- **Other groups/class:** Suspend all in-person meeting of groups/classes.
- **Discourage gathering:** discourage social gathering inside or on the grounds (e.g., parking lot):
 - By eliminating meet and greet time before and after services,
 - By urging attendees to exit promptly after services,
 - And by eliminating other occasions and closing off areas for social gathering.
- **Offerings/contributions:** the rule against sharing items applies to offering plates.
 - Instead, consider encouraging the use of giving offerings/contributions electronically.
 - Consider collecting in-person offerings/contributions without contact. For example, envelopes may be distributed by ushers wearing gloves at the entrance. Attendees can then deposit the envelopes in stationary receptacles as they exit.
- **One-way traffic:** stagger entry and exits between services to eliminate crowding. At the end of service, dismiss attendees by sections or rows to eliminate crowding near exits.
- **Communion:** Should be performed as follows:
 - All Communion lines should be single file, with people wearing masks, approaching row by row and keeping 6 ft. apart, except for family members. Neither the priest nor the communicants should wear gloves during the distribution of Holy Communion.
 - The priest should hold the consecrated host over the communicants' outstretched hands and drop the host into their hands without touching their hands. There will be no distribution of the Precious Blood.
 - Communicants will receive the consecrated host in their hand, step to at least 6 ft. away, lower their mask, consume the host, replace their mask, and return to their pew.

Houses of Worship | Physical space setup

- **Seating arrangement:** Rearrange space to maintain at least 6 ft. of distance between attendees.
 - Alternate rows between attendees (every other row should be kept empty).
 - Two or more members of the same household may be seated adjacent to each other with 6 ft. distance maintained on either side from the next attendee.
 - The capacity constraint should be further reduced by the limitation imposed by the seating arrangement, if applicable.
- **Reserved seating:** Designate an area inside the facility reserved for the at-risk population, if they are allowed to attend in-person service that is not reserved for at-risk population or if there is no at-risk population only in-person service.
- **Social distancing markers:** Install visual social distancing markers to enforce seating arrangement and, by marking seats as use or non-use.
 - Alternatively, engage ushers to guide attendees to seats and enforce seating arrangement.
- **Common items:** Discontinue the sharing of common items (e.g., microphones, books, hymnals, scriptural texts) between attendees; keep items in storage for at least 48 hours between use.
 - Consider assigning religious books to a family or individual that they can bring to each service, or use a projector for the display of sacred texts, scriptures, and songs.
- **Common space:** Close off common areas except to the extent needed to provide service. Such common areas may include foyers, lobbies, vending areas, community and multi-purpose rooms, and event spaces. If they are needed to provide service, then the House of Worship should ensure no social gathering take place in such areas.
- **Signage:** Post conspicuous signage that reinforces new policies, including at minimum:
 - Strong discouragement of at-risk population to attend in-person,
 - Instruction to maintain 6 ft. distance at all times except between family members,
 - Instruction to keep face covering on at all times,
 - The need for all to stay home if sick/experiencing symptoms.
- **Ventilation:** Increase ventilation rates and increase the percentage of outdoor air that circulates into the system where possible.
- **Food and drink services:** Discontinue all food & drink services for attendees, volunteers & employees.
 - Houses of Worship may continue to distribute food and drinks as long as they are distributed in pre-packaged containers and are not consumed on premise. For example, a House of Worship may continue to distribute food and drinks to low-income residents.

Houses of Worship | Cleaning and disinfecting

- **Hand sanitizer:** Hand sanitizer should be made available at entrance points.
- **Handwashing:** Ensure members of the clergy, employees and volunteers wash their hands routinely using soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- **Bathrooms:** Clean and disinfect frequently, implement use of cleaning log for tracking. Clean multiple times a day and once between each in-person service.
- **Cleaning and disinfecting:** Clean and disinfect the following before each service. If the House of Worship is open but not offering services, then clean frequently:
 - Door knobs
 - All seating areas
 - Follow federal guidelines (CDC, EPA) on what specific products should be used and how (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>).
 - Use products that meet EPA's criteria for use against SARS-CoV-2 and that are appropriate for the surface. Prior to wiping the surface, allow the disinfectant to sit for the necessary contact time recommended by the manufacturer. Train staff on proper cleaning procedures to ensure safe and correct application of disinfectants.
 - Disinfectants are irritants and sensitizers and should be used cautiously.
- **Kitchen:** If the House of Worship chooses to continue to offer limited food and drink services as outlined above, sanitize kitchen and kitchen equipment on an ongoing basis (at least daily) and more frequently if used more often.

Houses of Worship | Health guidance for clergy, employees and volunteers

- **Daily health check:** Ask clergy, employees and volunteers on-premise to confirm they have not experienced Covid-19 CDC-defined symptoms and to monitor their own symptoms, including cough, shortness of breath, or any two of the following symptoms:
 - Fever
 - Chills
 - Repeated shaking with chills
 - Muscle pain
 - Headache
 - Sore throat
 - New loss of taste or smell

Members of clergy, employees and volunteers should stay home if sick. If members of clergy live on premise, they should be quarantined from any public facing areas.
- **In the event of a positive Covid-19 case:** members of the clergy, employees, and volunteers should inform their head of the House of Worship and follow state testing and contact tracing protocols.

Houses of Worship | Personal protection

- **Personal protection for members of the clergy and employees:**
 - All members of the clergy and employees are required to wear a mask or other cloth face covering that completely covers the nose and mouth, unless doing so would be contrary to his or her health or safety due to medical conditions.
 - Members of the clergy are exempt from this rule when they are addressing attendees and are at least 12 ft. away from the nearest person (e.g., when giving sermon).
- **Houses of Worship are responsible for providing personal protection to their employees.**
 - If Houses of Worship do not have adequate personal protection, they cannot open.
- **Personal protection for attendees and volunteers:** Attendees and volunteers are required to bring & wear masks or cloth face covering that completely covers the nose and mouth unless doing so would be contrary to his or her health or safety due to a medical condition.
 - Attendees and volunteers should keep the masks or cloth face covering on at all times when they are inside the House of Worship.
- **Gloves and eye protection for members of the clergy, employees and volunteers.**
 - Gloves and eye protection are required when using cleaning chemicals.
 - If the House of Worship chooses to keep the kitchen open to provide limited food and drink services as outlined above, then those in the kitchen should follow FDA guidelines on usage of gloves.
 - Gloves are required when volunteers are interacting with attendees such as when they hand out envelopes for donation.