

## **20200508 Northam Religious Service Guidelines**

### **Religious Services**

#### **Phase I: Religious services must be conducted according to the following requirements.**

Given the public health implications of the 2020 global pandemic, the Commonwealth's diverse faith community quickly adjusted in response to this unprecedented crisis.

Therefore, it is important that the diverse faith communities in Virginia stay informed with local, state, and national officials using the links below:

- [CDC's main COVID-19 Web page](#)
- [Virginia Department of Health COVID-19 Web page](#)
- [Virginia Governor's COVID-19 Web page](#)

### **Mandatory Requirements**

Religious services must strictly adhere to the following requirements:

- Occupancy shall be limited to no more than 50% of the lowest occupancy load on the certificate of occupancy of the room or facility in which the religious services are conducted.
- Individuals attending religious services must be seated at least six feet apart at all times and must practice physical distancing at all times. Family members, as defined in Executive Order 61, Order of Public Health Emergency Three, may be seated together. Mark seating in six-foot increments.
- It is recommended that persons attending religious services be encouraged to wear face coverings over their nose and mouth at all times (See [CDC Use of Cloth Face Coverings guidance](#) for more detailed information.).
- No items must be passed to or between attendees who are not family members as defined in EO 61, Order of Public Health Emergency Three.
- Any items used to distribute food or beverages must be disposable and used only once and discarded.
- A thorough cleaning and disinfection of frequently contacted surfaces must be conducted prior to and following any religious services.
- Post signage at the entrance that states that no one with a fever or symptoms of COVID-19, or known exposure to a COVID-19 case in the prior 14 days, is permitted in the establishment.
- Post signage to provide public health reminders regarding social distancing, gatherings, options for high risk individuals, and staying home if sick (samples at the bottom of this document).
- If any place of worship cannot adhere to the above requirements, it must not conduct in-person services. Other suggested guidance for faith communities and funeral directors can be found below.

### **Best Practices**

In addition to the requirements provided above, faith communities are encouraged to utilize the following best practices to the extent they are feasible:

- Designate a health coordinator and/or health equity team who will be responsible for COVID-19 planning and preparation for your place of worship.
- For the **building**:
  - Conduct thorough [cleaning](#) before and between services.
  - Use separate doors to enter and exit the establishment when possible.
  - Allow interior doors to remain open to limit touching of door handles.
  - Provide sanitizing stations throughout the building, particularly at entry and exit points.
  - Consider installing touchless door entry systems or providing single-use barriers (i.e., paper towels) for use in touching door and sink handles in bathroom facilities.
  - Use messaging boards or digital messaging and social media for announcements to eliminate use of bulletins and handouts.
- For weekly **religious services**:
  - Members are safer at home. Continue to provide and encourage use of online streaming and drive-in options for people who can utilize these options. No place of worship should feel obligated to return to in-person worship before they are ready to do so.
  - Consider holding multiple services, with time for thorough cleaning in between each service, to allow for greater distancing during services.
  - Suspend the choir as part of services.
  - Consider shorter services to avoid the need for people to use bathroom facilities.
  - Consider limiting or suspending youth services until a safer time.
  - Consider holding small group or separate services for [senior citizens and other high-risk populations](#)
    - Consider making this the first service of the week, after thorough cleaning and disinfection of facilities have been performed.
    - Ensure the use of face coverings and physical distancing is maintained between individuals at this service.
    - Ensure social distancing in parking lots or common areas.
  - Consider discontinuing use of common items (e.g., microphones, books, hymnals, scriptural texts) that may be shared between people and are difficult to clean. 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.
  - When oils, water, ashes, or other materials are applied to a person's forehead, self-application should be used, to the extent possible.
  - Discontinue shared meals and other activities where people may gather in groups (e.g., limit or suspend coffee stations, shared food, meet and greet time before and after services etc.), with the exception of essential food services for low-income residents.
- Possible methods for religious services:

- **Drive-in/parking lot church:** This is the safer model of religious service where social distancing may be maintained.
- **Sign-up worship services:** This will limit the number of live worship services. Ask members, visitors, or guests to sign up for one live service per month, or every other week (in Phase 1). If needed, members can take turns between online and in-person worship services during this interim time. Allow space for impromptu visitors by registering fewer people (for each worship or religious service) than the maximum allowed per the occupancy restrictions.
- **Multiple gatherings during the week:** A place of worship may divide the number of congregants by the maximum occupancy level and offer worship services at that level. Consider adding online services, multiple services on one day, or alternative services during the week and/or on Saturdays and Sundays.
- **Utilize multiple methods:** As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, most places of worship lost the ability to gather in-person, but many gained a stronger online presence. Consider nurturing both aspects for at-risk individuals, as well as for the increased capacity to reach and serve those outside of the walls of the faith organization.
- **Adult-only services:** This method asks parents of young children to alternate worship attendance (naturally reducing attendance, as one parent stays home with children).
- **Online-only:** Take this approach if you are in a high-risk area, your place of worship is not yet prepared with the conditions outlined in the state guidelines for opening, you or a member of your family has COVID-19 symptoms, or the governing authorities have requested additional measures in the interest of public health.