



Guidance for Gathering Together in Houses of Worship

Tennessee is stronger because of our citizens and communities of faith. Governor Lee is thankful to the houses of worship and faith communities that have played a large part in Tennessee's success to slow the spread of COVID-19 through social distancing and other means of worshiping together without physically gathering.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution and Article I of the Tennessee Constitution protect the right of Tennesseans to worship and freely exercise their religion in every aspect of their lives according to the dictates of their own consciences. Additionally, the Tennessee Religious Freedom Restoration Act (T.C.A. § 4-1-407) provides additional protections for religious liberty. Thus, state and local governments must ensure these core constitutional and statutory rights are protected.

This resource is an aggregation of suggested protocols from various faith communities across Tennessee. Not all suggestions will be appropriate for each faith community. These suggestions are included as a courtesy for your convenience. These suggestions are not, and should not be construed as, mandates or requirements by the State of Tennessee, the Governor's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, or any other entity of federal, state, or local government.

Moving forward, people should continue to exercise caution while COVID-19 remains present in Tennessee. To minister to vulnerable populations while also protecting those populations and continuing our state's progress to contain COVID-19, faith communities are strongly encouraged to continue offering online services and other creative methods of worship and ministry. Faith communities should conduct as many activities as possible remotely and should follow the recommendations in this guidance when deciding to begin gathering in person once again.

Decisions about when to resume in-person gatherings are serious and should be made by each house of worship and its leadership based on the unique needs of its faith community, and in consideration of preserving and protecting health and safety to the greatest extent practicable. Governor Lee's executive orders have been clear that religious services are essential, rather than social gatherings. Caring for the elderly and persons at risk of severe illness due to COVID-19 is incredibly important to faith communities, and gatherings that include these vulnerable populations uniquely put them at risk. As such, faith leaders should evaluate the specifics of their congregation, community, and facility when determining when and how to gather in person. Due to the potential high risks of potential widespread transmission of COVID-19 in houses of worship, faith communities are encouraged to continue alternative worship options.

When faith leaders determine it is time to begin gathering in person again, faith communities should recognize that meeting in person should be different from meeting in person before the COVID-19 pandemic. It is likely that certain changes to in-person gatherings should remain in place until a vaccine for COVID-19 is widely available. Governor Lee hopes that all Tennesseans will continue to make responsible choices to protect themselves and their neighbors from COVID-19.

Here are some guidelines for your faith community as you determine when and how to offer in-person gatherings:

1. Evaluate how you can provide for your congregation spiritually and emotionally, while continuing to protect populations at risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and reduce the spread of COVID-19.
2. Wear face coverings. Social distance by staying 6 feet away from others. Consult the CDC guidelines and guidance from your local health officials to determine the risks of gathering in person. This should include thinking about the percentage of your community classified as at-risk of severe illness due to COVID-19, how conducive your facility is to allowing social distancing, the size of your community, and more.
3. A phased approach to resuming in-person gatherings is recommended. Populations at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (older persons or persons with [certain underlying medical conditions](#)) should not gather in person until a later time. Children's activities/nursery programs should follow applicable child care guidance: <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/human-services/documents/Guidance%20for%20Child%20Care%20Providers.pdf>. Consider solutions to minimize close personal contact that may have been part of prior services, such as handshakes or sharing food and drink.
4. As the phased approach begins, limit the size of attendance in your sanctuary and other confined spaces to create seating arrangements that provide at least 6-foot distancing between household units. While no specific capacity percentage is being recommended, take into account factors such as facility capacity and physical characteristics, type of activity involved, and location (indoor vs. outdoor) to properly assess risk and exercise good faith judgment in maintaining appropriate social distancing for each unique situation. Doing so will enable full compliance with CDC recommendations for social distancing, hand hygiene, and proper ventilation. Over time, as Tennessee continues to see the successful containment of COVID-19, it may be appropriate to gradually increase capacity.
5. Encourage members of your community to stay at home if they are symptomatic, have a fever, have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive.
6. If you learn that a member of your congregation has tested positive for COVID-19, consult CDC guidelines and local health department recommendations to determine whether you should immediately cease in-person gatherings, close for additional cleaning, or otherwise change your protocols.
7. Stay informed of updated safety protocols and recommendations as the COVID-19 situation in your community develops.

Leadership

Leading well through this time of uncertainty is essential; involve your leadership team to creatively and safely navigate this time of transition. There will naturally be new ministry opportunities to develop, and some prior ministry programs may change drastically.

1. Communicate to your congregation the steps you are taking to maintain clean and safe conditions on campus and to deliver relevant ministries safely.
2. Extend the good habits your community has embraced since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as pastoral care through small groups and digital communication and look for opportunities to adopt additional best practices.
3. Evaluate which practices are inappropriate to continue while COVID-19 remains a threat.
4. Require a COVID-19 symptom check on all staff and volunteers.
 - A. Screen all staff and volunteers for COVID-19 symptoms before services with the following questions:
 - Have you been in close contact with a case of COVID-19?
 - Are you experiencing a cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat?

- Have you had a fever in the last 48 hours?
 - Have you had new loss of taste or smell?
 - Have you had vomiting or diarrhea in the last 24 hours?
- B. Temperature screening for staff and volunteers before services:
- Take temperatures on site with a no-touch thermometer each day upon arrival or request that temperatures be taken before arriving. Normal temperature should not exceed 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit.
- C. Direct any staff member or volunteer who exhibits COVID-19 symptoms (i.e., answers yes to any of the screening questions or who is running a fever) to leave the premises immediately and seek medical care and/or COVID-19 testing, per CDC guidelines. Employers should maintain the confidentiality of this health information.
5. Plan for potential COVID-19 cases, and cooperate with local health department (e.g., monitor and trace COVID-19 cases, deep clean facilities)

Prepare Your House of Worship

1. Prepare your facility for in-person worship and gathering. Walk your campus with fresh eyes regarding upkeep and cleanliness. Invite medical professionals to help develop best practices related to the health of your congregation.
2. Take steps to ensure that all mechanical and water systems are properly functioning and safe to use after a prolonged facility shutdown (for example, to minimize the risk of [Legionnaires' disease](#)).

Cleaning/Disinfection

Implement new protocols to reduce the spread of the virus.

1. Mitigate exposure by implementing social distancing guidelines – Stay at least 6 feet from other people, don't hug or shake hands, and follow other CDC guidelines (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html>).
2. Implement cleaning and disinfection practices, according to CDC guidelines (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>).
3. Disinfect shared resources after each use, and disinfect all high-traffic/high-touch areas (restrooms, doorknobs, counters, microphones, seats, etc.)
4. Use a clearly designated entrance and a separate clearly designated exit to maintain social distancing. Put up signage to direct pedestrian flow through the facility.
5. Ensure that ventilation systems operate properly and, where possible, increase circulation of outdoor air by opening windows and doors, using fans, etc. Do not open windows and doors if doing so would violate local ordinances or pose a safety risk to children using the facility.

Communicate with members of your faith community (flyers, e-mail, social media) about steps you're taking to prepare the house of worship for their arrival and ways the in-person gathering will be different. Remind them of social distancing protocols. Be mindful of the diverse health needs of other members. **Remind people who are sick or have been exposed to not attend in-person gatherings and participate virtually instead.**

Logistics

Modify the logistics of in-person gatherings to promote social distancing.

1. We recommend returning to in-person gatherings in phases for your in-person ministries. Communicate with populations at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and families

requiring childcare during the worship service to encourage appropriate precautions. Keep an online meeting option for those who are uncomfortable or unable to attend your service in person for any reason.

2. Offer more services than you typically do to allow greater social distancing and accommodate lower capacity limits, while considering scheduling services to allow for cleaning and social distancing.
3. Ensure seating is spaced out at least six feet apart, with groups of seats together to allow household units to sit together. Consider broadcasting the service to other rooms in the facility to allow proper social distancing.
4. Move and limit unnecessary physical objects in order to reduce potential transmission of the virus. Limit sharing physical items among congregants.
5. Develop a fun, no-contact way to greet each other. Rely on staff or other ministers to welcome congregants and set the tone for new behaviors.
6. Consider creating new routes or methods of entrance and exit, avoiding congregating in highly populated areas, and dismissing in an orderly way to ensure proper social distancing.

Worship Programming

1. Modify distribution protocols if your tradition involves shared food or drink (e.g. communion). Avoid passing a plate or cup.
2. Suspend choirs or replace with soloists or small ensembles of individuals spaced at least 6 feet apart (or more if possible due to increased risk of projecting respiratory droplets). Consider the use of face coverings for such persons.
3. Avoid sharing and passing microphones. Limit sharing physical items among congregants, encouraging congregants to bring copies or using electronic means.
4. Create other ways to allow people to give without passing collection plates (e.g. stationary collection locations, encouraging online giving).
5. Divide smaller gatherings, like Sunday School or Sabbath School classes, into smaller groups to maintain the social distancing standards.

Amenities

1. Post signs to remind and encourage people to wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, practice social distancing, and practice good hygiene practices (e.g., covering coughs and sneezes and washing hands).
2. Make sure there is an adequate supply soap and/or hand sanitizer (60% alcohol) available to make it easy for people to access and use often.
3. Supply cloth face coverings (N-95 masks and surgical masks should be reserved for medical providers). Face coverings should not be returned or used by multiple people.
4. Coffee stations should be closed, and group meals are strongly discouraged.

Other Resources

For Guidance on Populations at Increased Risk of Severe Illness from COVID-19, visit here:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>

For Guidance on Cleaning and Disinfecting Facilities, visit here:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>

For Guidance on Wearing Face Coverings, visit here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>