

Q: When can we start worshipping together in indoor gatherings?

A: The opening of our church buildings is tied to the [Ohio Public Health Advisory System](#). Churches in yellow or orange counties can now move to Phase II: Regathering in Person. Please consult the detailed guidelines for limited reopening on pages 8-12 of the [Diocese of Southern Ohio Phased Return to Increasing In-Person Parish Life](#). Requirements and recommendations for worship can be found on page 10 and 11. Please note that safety guidelines outlined in the guidebook should be strictly followed.

Ohio has made significant strides containing the virus, and as of 8/31/20 the majority of counties in Southern Ohio are yellow or orange. However, as we've seen in the past, public health conditions are very fluid; church leaders need to consult the [Ohio Public Health Advisory System](#) website weekly for updates and adjust accordingly.

Ohio Public Health Advisory System

Level 1 Public Emergency: active exposure and spread. **Yellow**

Level 2 Public Emergency: increased exposure and spread. Exercise high degree of caution. **Orange**

Level 3 Public Emergency: very high exposure and spread. Limit activities as much as possible. **Red**

Level 4 Public Emergency: severe exposure and spread. Only leave home for supplies and services. **Purple**

Q: When can we begin outdoor gatherings?

A: In his [July 20, 2020 message](#), Bishop Breidenthal announced that outdoor gatherings for Sunday services, Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Liturgy of the Word, baptisms, weddings and funerals are permissible. This also applies to congregations who are in Phase I owing to the red status under the [Ohio's Public Health Advisory System](#).

It is recommended that congregations initially start outdoor gatherings with a small congregation of 20 (including clergy and worship leaders), and eventually work up to the maximum you can safely fit within distancing requirements. The bishop asks that all congregations who hold outdoor gatherings "exercise extreme care and discipline" by adhering to the following safety protocols:

- Masks are worn
- Numbers are limited so that 6-foot social distancing can be strictly observed between non-household groups
- No singing
- No preaching or reading within 20-feet of anyone



Q. When can we resume celebrating the eucharist?

A: Holy Communion, the sacrament of our union with Christ and with one another, lies at the center of our public worship. Having to forgo the celebration of the eucharist these many months has been a difficult challenge for our worshipping community. Unfortunately, giving and receiving communion remains a significant safety concern as the pandemic continues to rage.

In his [July 1 reflection](#) regarding our fast from the eucharist, Bishop Breidenthal set Sunday, October 18, as a tentative date for the resumption

of the eucharist. An announcement will be made closer to that date as moving ahead will depend on how Ohio is progressing with COVID-19 containment.



Q: Are face coverings required in Ohio houses of worship?

A: [Governor DeWine announced](#) on July 23 that a statewide mask mandate would go into effect for citizens living in all 88 Ohio counties. The state now requires individuals to wear face coverings at all indoor locations that are not a residence, and outdoors if one is unable to maintain a six-foot social distance from non-household members. While officiants at religious services are officially excluded from the mandate, members of the congregation are required to wear masks.

Q: Will the diocese continue to require facial coverings if the state relaxes the mask mandate or exempts religious facilities?

A: Many faith-based organizations, including the Diocese of Southern Ohio, elected to comply with stay-at-home orders to ensure the health and safety of their congregations, community and employees, and committed to respect the state's authority to fairly balance public safety and private freedom. Now that we are cautiously starting to regather for group worship in a confined space, we are continuing to follow suggested safety protocol for face coverings and physical distancing. The state of Ohio strongly recommends wearing face coverings to help stop the spread of the virus, as does the Center for Disease Control.

We are closely monitoring [Ohio's Public Health Advisory System](#). We will continue doing everything we can to encourage safe interactions in our communities. As a religious organization we support the directives of our elected officials to promote the common good. Please refer to Bishop Breidenthal's July 5, 2020 letter, where he writes:

"When we are truest to what is best in our tradition, we Episcopalians are about honoring the state, even as we hold it to account. We have the opportunity to demonstrate this by supporting our governor in his efforts to help Ohio get the better of COVID-19. I thank all our congregations for your diligence, discipline and patience as we move through this time."

Q: What is seen as a facial covering as referenced in the diocesan regathering guidance document?

A: Due to the fact that our congregations fall in different geographical areas with different guidance provided by each, the diocesan guidance document refers to facial coverings and does not specify whether this is a cloth mask or if this includes face shields. We ask each of our churches that are in the cities where local jurisdictions have issued specific definitions (like [Cincinnati](#), [Columbus](#), and [Dayton](#)) to follow those definitions. If a church is in a location that has not issued a definition for facial coverings, then they should follow the [CDC guidelines](#), which excludes face shields, as the default position.

Q: Are we in Phase 1 or Phase 2?

A: Congregations may now make the decision to move into Phase 2 at this time. The factors that will help guide the decision to move into Phase 2 are:

- Public health indicators for your specific area. The state of Ohio is now using a [color-coded alert system](#). It shows county-by-county hot spots as the coronavirus continues to spread across the state. The new system displays the prevalence of the virus in each county, making it easier to implement additional closures or measures on a county-by-county basis. This data should be reviewed on a weekly basis. Should your county be at an alert level 1 or 2, then your leaders (clergy and vestry) will need to decide if/when to return to in-person services. Please use caution when making this decision. Staffing of your respective buildings should be reviewed in a similar light.
- Congregation's ability to follow the guidelines issued as it relates to disinfecting, wearing of masks, etc.
- Setup of building if it allows physical distancing.



At this time there is no indication as to when Phase 3 will occur. We estimate that this may take several months, but will communicate as more information comes available. Also, keep in mind there is always the possibility of moving back to Phase 1 if public health orders require us to do so.

Q: When congregations re-open, are they guided by the amount of space they have for physical distancing, their 50% occupancy rate, or a cap on the number (like 10)?

A: For worship gatherings, each congregation needs to make their decision on how many can safely gather in their specific space; with a **maximum** of 50% occupancy and taking into consideration physical distancing of at least 6 feet between family units. It is advisable for larger congregations to have a limit **lower than** 50% to start, and to work up to that level over a few weeks by observing how people react to the distancing requirements and wearing of masks.

Q: Do our social distancing guidelines also control the admittance of small groups and outside groups such as AA, etc.?

A: Yes. Any group entering the building must agree to comply with the social distancing guidelines, wearing masks and sanitization rules. It is suggested to start with a limit of 10 people for these groups and work up to larger numbers (not exceeding 50% of occupancy) depending on size of the room. Each meeting room should display maximum occupancy and have only enough seating available for that number. In addition, it would be helpful to display a floor plan diagramming how to ensure the 6 foot distancing.

Q: What liability does the church have if someone contracts the virus while attending a service or using the church for a meeting?

A: There is no special provision in Church Insurance policies regarding COVID-19 liability. It is recommended that a cautionary statement be published in the invitation to reopen that attendance at worship is subject to the risk of contracting the disease and that by attending you are voluntarily assuming that risk. Our chancellor has suggested this wording but it should not be used as a standalone statement:

"We ask that all present observe our guidelines and rules for health and safety during worship. We cannot and do not guarantee the absence of risk from your presence with us."

Church Insurance Co. has provided this guidance: For liability, a covered occurrence is defined as an accident (aka unforeseeable) and we do not know if this type of loss (claim in terms of COVID-19) fits that definition. Additionally, we do not know how courts will see this type of suit since it has never been tested. In general, coverage opinions suggest coverage is unlikely but again, we cannot answer the question definitively without specific details of a loss. Of course, the best defense against lawsuits is to avoid negligence. In any event, we will review every claim on a case-by-case basis.

Q: Is the liturgy of Spiritual Communion authorized until actual reception is allowed?

A: Bishop Breidenthal has indicated that Spiritual Communion is acceptable. Some churches are using this traditional prayer from the Army Prayer Book:

In union, O Lord with the faithful at every altar of Thy Church, where the Holy Eucharist is now being celebrated, I desire to offer Thee praise and thanksgiving. I present to Thee my soul and body with the earnest wish that may always be united to Thee. And since I can not now receive Thee sacramentally, I beseech Thee to come spiritually into my heart. I unite myself to Thee, and embrace Thee with all the affections of my soul. Let nothing ever separate Thee from me. May I live and die in Thy love. Amen.

You also can find an expanded, modern liturgy in St. Augustine's Prayer Book ([Forward Movement](#), 2014) pp. 190-193.

