

The background is a dark, semi-transparent stained glass window. It features a central figure of a woman in a white and blue robe, standing and reading an open book. To her left is a tall, thin cypress-like tree, and to her right is a large, leafy tree. The bottom of the window shows a landscape with a path, a vase of flowers, and a large globe or sphere. The overall color palette is muted, with blues, greens, and earthy tones.

Reopening Guidelines

VERSION 3

MAY 19, 2021

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESES OF
**Western New York &
Northwestern Pennsylvania**

Letter from Bishop Sean

Dear People of God in Western New York and Northwestern Pennsylvania:

In the last two months, thanks to the increasing availability of effective vaccines against COVID-19, both cases and deaths have declined steadily across our region. Last week, the Centers for Disease Control relaxed its guidance for fully vaccinated people, and state and local authorities are also reevaluating existing restrictions.

Accordingly, we have prepared these guidelines to help congregations in our diocesan partnership navigate this transitional time. COVID-19 is not yet behind us, and risk remains for our children and youth and for those with health conditions that make vaccination inadvisable. As Christians, we must err on the side of welcoming and protecting those who remain vulnerable, while at the same time celebrating the progress we have made toward regathering our communities in the ways we have hoped to do for so long.

So that our congregations remain welcoming to everyone, I invite you to worship and gather outdoors whenever possible and recommend that you require masks and social distance indoors until all children and youth have had the opportunity to be vaccinated. However, recognizing that each of our congregations will face different questions and challenges during this transition, I would like each congregation's vestry or bishop's committee to work with their clergy to develop masking and social distancing requirements that fit your congregation and context. Once you have had a chance to discuss this issue and craft a plan for your congregation, please send it to [Canon Vanessa Butler](#) in my office. Partnership staff and I are available if you would like to consult with us before making your decisions.

The only remaining requirement in these guidelines is that programs for children and youth be held outdoors whenever possible, with masks and at least three feet of social distance. In July, after more of our young people, ages 12 and up, are fully vaccinated, we will be able to relax those standards. Programs for children under age 12 will continue to require appropriate masking and social distancing for the foreseeable future.

A final word for those of you who have not yet been vaccinated:

The pandemic has been long and hard, and although I know that at times it has been difficult to know whom to trust or where to turn for reliable information, I urge you to believe the science behind the vaccines. In clinical trials, all of the vaccines being administered in the United States are extremely effective in preventing both death and serious illness—the kind that can land you in the hospital. Although it may seem as if these vaccines were developed quickly, the underlying research that makes them possible has been two decades in the making, and we can rely on it. I was vaccinated as soon as my turn came, and I hope you will choose to do the same. In the last 14 months, we have lost too many people to this terrible disease, and too many others are still battling its after-effects. By getting vaccinated, you can help make sure that we do not lose anyone else.

Faithfully,

+Sean

These guidelines supersede all previous versions issued by the diocesan partnership. They are informed by the most recent guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control and state authorities.

Masking and Social Distancing: Congregational Plans Required

Bishop Sean recommends that:

- Congregations continue to require masks at indoor worship until all people, including children, have had the opportunity to be vaccinated.
- Unvaccinated people wear masks at both indoor and outdoor worship.
- Six feet of social distance between household groups be maintained at indoor and outdoor worship.

Taking these recommendations into account, vestries or bishop's committees and congregational clergy should develop mask and social distance guidelines that are appropriate for their settings, keeping in mind the need to make our churches welcoming to families with children, newcomers and those with medical vulnerabilities.

- In particular, congregational plans should consider how they will handle greeting, passing the peace and distributing the Eucharist in ways that allow everyone, vaccinated and unvaccinated, to feel safe and welcome at church.
- When your congregational masking and social distancing plan is complete, please email it to [Canon Vanessa Butler](#).

Worship Recommendations

Whenever possible, gather outdoors for worship and coffee hours instead of indoors. Unvaccinated people should continue to wear masks outdoors.

Follow capacity guidelines set by the [Commonwealth of Pennsylvania](#) and the [State of New York](#).

Continue contact tracing protocols and consider using an online event service such as Signup Genius to take reservations for worship to ensure you do not exceed capacity and to gather contact information for attendees.

Online Worship

Bishop Sean encourages congregations to continue providing meaningful online worship and fellowship for people at home. [Find examples of hybrid worship at congregations in our diocesan partnership on the website.](#)

Ventilation Options

Introduce fresh air whenever and wherever possible. Go outside, open windows, work with your HVAC professionals to adjust your system where possible, and consider additional ventilation and air circulation options:

- [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) Indoor Air and Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Guide](#)
- [Molekule air purifiers](#) are available for spaces up to 1000 feet
- [Air filtration devices that can be installed into HVAC systems](#)
- Consulting with your HVAC vendor or other air filtration contractor

Communion Recommendations

Bread and wine should be brought to the table by the presider. The presider sets their own table and only the presider should be at table.

Pour only a small amount of wine into the chalice to be consumed at the end of the service when unused hosts are consumed.

Use hosts instead of homemade bread. Use a small presider host.

Have only the presider host directly in front of you during consecration. Have a ciborium of hosts for congregants to the side, and consider covering the elements being consecrated.

Think through how you will minimize person-to-person contact for administering the sacrament; how you will sanitize and re-sanitize before and while administering the sacrament; and how you will orchestrate your movements. Please remember that according to The Book of Common Prayer (BCP) rubrics, consecration can be accomplished with a minimum of gestures and touching of elements.

Create directional signage and instructions for how to receive communion.

Masks should be worn according to the congregation's policy.

Baptism Recommendations

Baptism can happen according to the Book of Common Prayer rubric. Masks should be worn and distancing should be maintained according to your congregation's policy.

Music Recommendations

The Centers for Disease Control indicates that singing in a choir without a mask is safe for fully vaccinated people.

When members of the congregation are not vaccinated, masks and social distance for the choir and the congregation are recommended.

Music Recommendations

For congregations in which it is certain that every attendee is fully vaccinated, congregational singing can also take place.

Congregational singing is not recommended at indoor services at which people age 15 and under or other unvaccinated people are present.

These guidelines also apply to brass and woodwind instrumentalists.

Wedding and Funeral Recommendations

Weddings and funerals can occur in keeping with the congregation's masking and social distance policy. We recommend that you follow all worship guidelines found in this document.

Feeding Ministry Recommendations

Feeding ministries may continue to-go service following the congregation's policies for masking and social distancing. We recommend that on-site meals be held outdoors only.

Children and Youth Program Requirements

Christian formation classes and vacation Bible School and other similar programs should take place outdoors wherever possible with all participants and leaders wearing masks and maintaining at least three feet of social distance.

Indoor programs and relaxed masking and social distancing can be planned for later in the summer as more youth are fully vaccinated.

Programs for children under age 12 will continue to require masking and social distancing for the foreseeable future.

Community Programs

Your congregation's guidelines must be communicated to community groups that use your building.

Thanks to the Dioceses of Indianapolis and Vermont for providing resources that have informed these guidelines.