



Clergy Webinar November 17, 2020

Bishop Susan opened the gathering in prayer, then delivered these remarks (*updated as of November 18th*):

As we prepare for Thanksgiving next week, questions about Christmas worship are on the increase - at the very time that the infection rate of the novel Coronavirus is dramatically on the increase. In response to these questions, please note the following adjustments to our guidelines for worship:

We will celebrate the birth of our Savior in ways that protect the lives of those he came to save. Those lives include not only those who worship, but all whose lives are touched by those who worship. Because of this commitment, we will not make exceptions to our current guidelines for worship or gatherings in our church buildings on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

In addition, in accordance with the order of the Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, any indoor worship by congregations that have received permission and are in locations that are in the green or lower end of the yellow zone for Coronavirus infections will be limited to an attendance of 25 persons, or the number named in the permission, whichever is lower.

Congregations that have permission to worship outdoors may do so in the numbers for which permission was originally given, following all guidelines of the Diocese of Virginia and of the Commonwealth of Virginia (included below).

I acknowledge that the Governor's order makes an exception for worship, both indoors and outdoors. That decision was made for political and, likely, financial reasons. We in the Church are not bound by the political divisions in our nation and will choose safety and the protection of human lives over fear of lawsuits or threats of withheld funding. Our faith protects us from fear and despair, but it does not protect us from infection by the novel Coronavirus.

Our holding fast to our current practices and our further restriction on numbers that may gather inside will be disappointing to many. Living in a pandemic is hard, especially as the holidays approach, especially because we've been doing it for so long, especially because infection rates are surging just when we're ready to be done with it. We have learned a lot about how to live in a pandemic, though. We have learned how to be community when we are not together, face to face, in person. We worshipped faithfully as we celebrated our Lord's resurrection on Easter and as we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. We can do the same as we celebrate the birth of our Savior on Christmas.

By holding firm to the course we have set we help ensure that, when we gather in our church buildings next Christmas, we will have lost none of our friends to the deadly virus because of the decisions we have made.

"Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus . . . so that [we] will not grow weary and lose heart."

From the Executive Order of the Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia:

SIXTH AMENDED NUMBER SIXTY-SEVEN (2020) AND ORDER OF PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY SEVEN PHASE THREE TIGHTENING OF CERTAIN TEMPORARY RESTRICTIONS DUE TO NOVEL CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

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B. OTHER RESTRICTIONS

1. All Public and Private In-Person Gatherings

All public and private in-person gatherings of more than 25 individuals are prohibited. The presence of more than 25 individuals performing functions of their employment or assembled in an educational instructional setting is not a “gathering.” A “gathering” includes, but is not limited to, parties, celebrations, or other social events, whether they occur indoors or outdoors.

Individuals may attend religious services of more than 25 people subject to the following requirements:

- a. Individuals attending religious services must be at least six feet apart when seated and must practice proper physical distancing at all times. Family members, as defined below, may be seated together.*
- b. Mark seating and common areas where attendees may congregate in six-foot increments to maintain physical distancing between persons who are not Family members.*
- c. Any items used to distribute food or beverages must be disposable, used only once and discarded.*
- d. Practice routine cleaning and disinfection of frequently-contacted surfaces must be conducted prior to and following any religious service.*
- e. Post signage at the entrance that states that no one with a fever or symptoms of COVID-19 is permitted to participate in the religious service.*
- f. Post signage to provide public health reminders regarding physical distancing, gatherings, options for high risk individuals, and staying home if sick.*
- g. Individuals attending religious services must wear cloth face coverings in accordance with Amended Executive Order 63, Order of Public Health Emergency Five.*
- h. If religious services cannot be conducted in compliance with the above requirements, they must not be held in-person.*

Further, any social gathering held in connection with a religious service is subject to the public and private in-person gatherings restriction in section B, paragraph 1. Additional suggested guidance can be found [here](#).

Bishop Goff then turned to the focus of today’s session regarding further guidance for Eucharistic Visitors and the ongoing work of preparing for regathering.

Report of the Eucharist Task Force

Bishop Porter Taylor and the Eucharist Task Force presented their findings. In his introductory remarks, Bishop Porter said the group would help us all to explore together how we can bring Holy Communion to our brothers and sisters who are unable to come to worship services. He lauded the work of committee members Charlie Dupree, Shearon Williams, Lee Gandiya, Ellen White, and Whitney Edwards.

He noted that one of our common concerns in this time of COVID-19 is how we focus on the Body of Christ itself and feel connected for those who cannot gather together. He also reminded attendees that one kind of the Eucharist is always sufficient. We'll have to constantly shift how we're doing things. It's not house churches, he said, emphatically stating "don't go there." It's really an adaptation in terms of what we've had for some time with Eucharistic Ministers. We honor our bodies and are mindful of being stewards of our bodies, so we don't do things that would endanger our lives.

Charlie Dupree and Whitney Edwards fleshed out the proposal that the Eucharist Task Force is bringing for discussion. Charlie said, "Bringing the sacrament is a great source of comfort and strength." Whitney said that the guidelines offered were developed in consultation with Dr. Gonzalo Biermann, an infectious disease specialist at VCU Health. They also consulted with Ross Catrow at the Virginia Department of Health. His team is dedicated to helping religious communities in worship practices.

Visitations should be outdoors wherever possible. Weather permitting, do them outdoors. There should always be six feet distance between people. Note the preparation of communion kits. Dr. Bearmann advised against traditional communion kits, but some sort of portable kit, perhaps in plastic containers. Note the **pre-visit protocols** regarding checking prior exposure to COVID, distance requirements, no touching, no laying on of hands. Handwashing is important. Make clear what CAN be done (**15 minutes at most.**) Limit people in the room to two persons, the one who is the primary recipient of the visit and one other person. Set the communion up on a table and lay the wafers on or in some sort of disposable server. Make sure all are masked. Note that 15-minute visits aren't considered real contacts by VDH, because of the limited time of exposure, which is why we are limiting to that timeframe.

The liturgy is based on the BOS 284-286 service.

This is a framework for your consideration and you need to assess this proposal and see if this works given your theology. Not everyone will want to do this, or feel comfortable with this.

NOTE: The Task Force is making some modifications to their liturgy and guidelines and we will share it as soon as the revised version is available to us.

Q&A

I understand the bishop's restrictions on 25 people for outdoor. What about drive-in, since this would not be a shared-air experience. **Yes. Earlier we had said no to drive-in, but we recognize this is a helpful approach in some contexts, so they are now permitted.**

We have a non-denominational congregation who rent space from us. The space they rent is physically cut off from the rest of the church. They have been good about complying with our rules. However, they are now starting to look for a different permanent home (not just COVID home). This will be a \$14,000 hole in our budget. Are we able to make exceptions in this type of situation? **Unfortunately, no.**

Should not the LEV have a test before they start a visitation schedule. We encourage them to do so. If they haven't had an exposure to COVID-19 in the past two weeks, according to the CDC, it is not necessary, but caution is always good.

Why does it say "6 ft between all participants, when it is likely that the 2 who might join together in one bubble? It is not a certainty that the two persons are actually living in the bubble together. There might be a caregiver who commutes to the home. We say all should be spaced out of an abundance of caution.

Bishop Porter Taylor and committee: some of us cannot gather outside, and in those contexts we are all "homebound" because we are remaining virtual for the most vulnerable in our midst. The nature of preparing a communion kit assumes the gathering of the local body; if we cannot do that, some of us feel excluded from this entire conversation. I feel that is a major concern that we are not addressing. Honestly, this is about agency. As priests, we are always making choices about what is appropriate in one's own parish context. If you are a priest and feel like your congregation has been cut off from the community, you can choose to do this. If the risk feels too high, you can choose not to.

I may have missed it, but my understanding is that if we offer drive-in outdoor worship, do not share Communion in one kind, and folks remain in their cars/trucks for the entire worship experience, we are not limited to 25 persons, correct? If it is drive-in, yes.

I can imagine that people who are not ill or infirm would a Eucharistic visit. Has there been any thought about how to handle that? This is not the intention of such visits at this time. We put this out for those who are ill or infirm.

My interpretation of the governor's order is that the 25-person limit is for situations where there is less strictness about social distancing. The exemption for houses of worship does clarify abundant precautions which we follow faithfully. Granted, there are probably some political reasons for the exemption, but I thought that our church's decision to allow outdoor gatherings was based in science. Scientifically how does limiting the size to 25 persons in a distanced setting, especially outdoors, really make a difference for us if we are following our guidelines? As of November 18th, the Bishop says you may proceed with outdoor worship for whatever number you have already received permission for, following the guidelines.

We are assuming reserved sacrament. Since we are not celebrating Eucharist at worship services, how/when do you suggest we consecrate bread for home visits? We suggest that the priest find one or two other persons and have a service where you consecrate enough for home visits.

Are there different guidelines for clergy communion visits? Or do these apply to all visitors? Same guidelines for clergy or LEVs.

Would the pre-prepared sealed communion bread/wine be acceptable that's available? You can use what will work in your context.

Did I understand correctly from Bishop Goff's earlier statement that the Diocese will voluntarily limit our worship attendance to 25 regardless of the Governor's exception for religious bodies? Yes.

I am hesitant to rely on pre-visit assurances around exposure, especially from parishioners with cognitive limitations. **Part of this is about knowing your people and part of it is about your comfort level. This is permission but not an expectation.**

I thought the governor exempted churches from 25-person limit (p 11 of the executive order) **This is true; however we believe that a gathering for 25 or more persons in any venue is unsafe; therefore we follow the more restrictive view.**

From one of our attendees: Here is one example of what folks are talking about in the “pre-packaged communion elements.” https://www.concordiasupply.com/TrueVine-Prefilled-Communion-Chalice-Cups-Bread-Juice-Sets-100?quantity=1&custcol_autoship=1

I don't see the words of institution anywhere in this proposed liturgy, but I have no consecrated elements, and I'm by myself in the parish. May I include those words in the service? I don't have any LEVs. **If you are a priest, you may insert the words of institution.**

I may have mis-heard, but was the question about words of institution being permissible for use in for home communion visits being applied to LEVs in churches without clergy? **No, that is not correct. Only priests may consecrate elements onsite.**

Have other denominational leaders pledged to support similar worship measures (in accordance with the Governor's order)? **We don't know.**

What are age limitations for LEVs? **Confirmed communicants 16 years old or older.**

Do the "disposable" requirement of the new guidelines and the guidance for LEV's affect distribution of communion in corporate worship? We are currently using our hands to drop a wafer into the hand of the recipient without touching, as allowed in the communion guidelines. **Yes, it does, to comply with the state guidelines.**

May the 25-person limit begin after this Sunday as we have already announced our outdoor service and started the usual sign up procedure? We limit it to 40. **Yes.**

We are developing lay-led house churches for use in Advent and Christmas Eve, based on Evening Prayer (no communion). We propose three modes of worship: Family unit only (in-person); via Zoom; and lastly in-person (with COVID restrictions; outdoors, socially distant, small numbers, etc). I'm gathering from this conversation that the last option is not safe, correct? Even though it's not communion. **That is permissible, with all the protocols in place.**

Not exactly a home visit. But, a neighbor, who worships virtually with a local Episcopal Church has asked if I would consecrate the bread for her so that she may actually consume during the virtual worship. Yes or No? **No, that is not the intention of what we are presenting.**

Are we limited to 25 even masked or distanced outdoors? **As of November 18th, the 25-person limit is for indoors worship only.**

May we do home visits with any parishioners who are healthy but who don't choose to come to church? **That is not really in the spirit of what we're trying to do here.**

Age question was regarding the age of older LEVs, and protecting their health...**Priests need to use their best judgment as to whom is safe to send.**

Is livestreaming services in the nave and chancel still limited to 10 participants in the nave at a time? **Yes.**

The pre-filled communion sets (individual, single use, disposable wafer and wine cups) are neither recyclable nor compostable even though compostable plastic drinking cups and plates are available now. Could diocese and bishops in ECUSA and other denominations adjoin in lobbying these companies to use ethical packaging so that we are not forced to choose between the planet and safer communion practices? **Yes. Note, however, that having manufacturers change their processes and materials may take time.**

We have permission to live-stream worship from the sanctuary during Advent and Christmas, with a presider and one other person (or a COVID bubble). Is that still acceptable? **Yes.**

Is there a time limit to the outdoor, in-person, 25 and under gatherings? **No, but shorter is always better. We must tell you, though, that there have been some cases of transmission of COVID at outdoor services in our diocese.**

Need clarification on livestreaming a spiritual communion from a sanctuary with 10+ in the building. No distribution, consumption, or reservation of sacrament (bread). Okay or No Go? **If it is less than ten persons, it's okay.**

What numbers are we using for our schools? **Refer to the guidance of your local health authorities and school authorities.**

Can we have 25 people participate in outdoor spiritual communion worship in person, with additional individuals participating in a "drive in" capacity, in our parking lot? **As long as everyone is keeping their six-foot distance and wearing masks, it is permitted.**

We are attempting to plan for an outdoor Christmas Eve service in a rented covered pavilion for a larger congregation. If the Governor lifts the 25-person limit, will we also lift the restriction? **We cannot give a dispositive answer because it depends on the circumstances of the Governor's lifting of restrictions and on the numbers we see in the health markers.**

Not exactly a home visit. But, a neighbor, who worships virtually with a local Episcopal Church has asked if I would consecrate the bread for her so that she may actually consume during the virtual worship. Yes or No? **Sorry, but no.**

What happens with the budget, since we did not pass the budget at Convention on Saturday? It was referred back to the Executive Board, which serves as the "convention between conventions" and they will pass a budget for 2021.

I have parishioners who are very eager to be confirmed in the Episcopal Church and officially join our parish. Has the bishop's visitation schedule for 2021 been published? Given that ordinations are being performed in the Diocese, can we expect confirmations to resume soon, since they both involve the laying on of hands? The visitation schedule is not yet established because we cannot know yet when it will be safe. Ordinations are few in number and are done individually. From a practical standpoint, we cannot do individual services of confirmation. In the larger parishes, there are sometimes as many as 70 confirmands. We know we'll have a lot of catching up to do, but an adult affirmation of faith is usually less time-dependent than baptism, for example.

A question was raised for the future about the efficacy of Indoor HEPA filters or UV air filters in reducing the risk of spreading Covid-19. Parishioners have even asked about the possibility of updating the church's HVAC filter and/or ventilation system. Do you know of any Diocese of Virginia churches that have implemented (or are working in implementing) any of those adaptations? Indoor HEPA filters may improve air quality indoors, although it is about the frequency of air exchange as much as filtration. UV is not usable in the church setting, because the time the UV would need to be on and the intensity of it would cause eye problems and skin cancer. It is also extraordinarily expensive.

Will you allow for a faster licensing of Lay Eucharistic Visitors so that we might reach more of our folks at home? We can turn these around fairly quickly these days.

Please ask Bishop Susan to restate the expectations regarding attendance: for both outside and inside for weekday and Sunday services and other services such as weddings and funerals, and also Christmas Eve and Day services. In essence, the guidelines for weekday and Sunday services as well as weddings and funerals, are precisely the same as before. The only difference is this: if you are approved for indoor regathering and your health markers are within the acceptable range (5 or under daily new cases per 100K persons) your maximum capacity cannot exceed 25. We cannot predict what the numbers will be for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, because we cannot guess what the case numbers will be. We will give further advice as Christmas gets closer.

Could Bp Porter say more about how "agency" is being defined? I am concerned that since everyone has been cut off from the Eucharist, there will be a greater demand about who can receive an EV. Discerning/deciding who is eligible versus who is not is very big deal and we could use more guidance on this. It feels like opening a door that we cannot close, so we better be very ready to figure out how to decide who receives. We trust your pastoral judgment on this. You may want to consider a triage system: attend to the sickest persons first, then the not-so-sick.

Are currently licensed LEMs' okay - don't need a new licensing? They don't need new licenses but you'll have to train them in the guidelines.

Can other groups who use our space have worship services in the parish hall if they keep to under 25, social distancing, masks, no singing, and no books? **Only if you have successfully petitioned for regathering indoors and if your health markers are met. The rules for your worshipping community also apply for other worshipping communities that use your space.**

Is Holy Baptism being practiced during this time? **With restrictions. Please check [this](#) document.**

So with this latest requirement by the Governor, when we consecrate bread for the Eucharist at outdoor worship services (now with now more than 25 people) we would no longer use silver patens and bowls, nor trays on which we would lay out the wafers for worshippers to get their wafers? **The Governor's guidelines stipulate the items must be served in disposable containers, such as paper cups, as you would receive pills from a nurse when in hospital.**

Since all of our people are now "shut-ins," may we do home communions with any parishioners who would like a visit? **This is not the intent. We trust your pastoral judgment, but we note that each additional visit is another possible inadvertent interaction with someone with undiagnosed COVID.**

Does the disposable-vessel requirement apply to Eucharist (services) as well? **Yes.**