



## **Guidelines for Pastoral Offices and Pastoral Care**

**July 8, 2020**

**Note: These Guidelines do not address the distribution of the bread and wine of communion. Your bishops continue to be in conversation with theologians and leaders across The Episcopal Church, as well as with epidemiologists, regarding when and how it will be safe to distribute communion. We anticipate sharing reflections and information later in the summer.**

### **Guidelines for Baptism**

Now that congregations may worship outdoors, we have a context for supporting baptisms. Baptism during worship in a pandemic can be done well and in a way that keeps everyone safe.

#### *Presentation and Examination of Candidates*

Distancing needs to be maintained and masks worn - as with every other part of the service.

#### *Thanksgiving over the Water*

The celebrant should sanitize hands before touching the water. It is the family's option whether or not to bring water from their own home, or for a large sealed container of bottled water to be used for the liturgy.

#### *The Baptism*

For an infant or young child, the parents (wearing masks) continue to hold the child.

The celebrant sanitizes hands. Still wearing a mask, the celebrant pours water upon the candidate with the appropriate words and using minimal direct touch. A baptismal shell or other small vessel may be used to prevent touch. Alternatively, an aspergillum may be used.

The celebrant seals the candidate with minimal touch - thumb only to trace the sign of the cross. We note that in sealing the baptized, the use of chrism is optional per the rubrics on page 308. A very brief sign of the cross on the forehead with or without oil is sufficient.

The celebrant stays within six feet of the parents and child only as long as absolutely necessary to baptize and seal the candidate. The celebrant must pour the water on the person being baptized.

Parents pouring the water while the celebrant speaks the words would violate the rubric on the bottom of BCP p. 307.

If the person being baptized is an older child or adult, they can stay properly distanced, wearing a mask, through the Thanksgiving for the Water and then step forward, bending over the font or bowl, while the water is poured. After the sign of the cross is made on their forehead, they then step back to the proper distance.

If there are multiple persons, not from the same family or household, to be baptized, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain the proper distancing. Unless it is absolutely necessary, please limit these rites to one person or persons from one household per service.

Although it is always safer to do this in an outdoor setting, if you have been approved for Phase II regathering, you may consider doing this as part of an in-church service. All the same protections and requirements are in place if the Baptism is conducted in an indoor service.

### **Guidelines for Marriage**

We have been suggesting that weddings be limited to those that are necessary, and that they be small and outdoors. That advice still continues. The CDC has also strongly advised against large gatherings<sup>1</sup>, because of the difficulty of maintaining physical distancing. Small weddings can be done inside the church if the parish has been approved for Phase II regathering; all the same protocols will apply that would apply to a regular service, including distancing, masks, disinfection, and no physical contact except in this case, of course, there may be physical contact between the couple.

For the time being, we continue to say that weddings should be outdoors, and that numbers be determined by the space in such a way that everyone can hear the service while remaining distanced. Currently, the Commonwealth of Virginia guidelines do not give a specific maximum number for outdoor activities, focusing instead on the requirement for masks and physical distancing. This applies to weddings, of course, recognizing that a priest's ability to exert authority to require distance and masks, etc., may be more limited in such a situation than would be possible when the priest guides their own parishioners. Any musical offering should be limited to a soloist and one instrumentalist. If there are chairs for attendees to use, they should be disinfected prior to use and afterwards. If the numbers attending mean that it will be difficult for attendees to hear the service, there should be amplification. When people cannot hear, they edge forward, even if they are seated. Children also may find it difficult to keep to distancing norms if they are in attendance.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html>

As to guidelines, please maintain physical distancing requirements. Since you would normally stand relatively close to the bride and groom, do your best to maximize that space. When blessing the rings, have them placed on the Book of Common Prayer rather than holding them in your hands. The persons to be married may pick up the rings when it is their turn to put a ring on the spouse's finger. At the declaration (BCP 428) it is preferable that the celebrant gestures that the couple join hands rather than joining their hands him or herself. If it is the celebrant's normal practice to wrap their stole around the hands of those marrying, we suggest that you refrain from that.

It may have also been your practice to lay hands on the heads of those who have been married at the blessing of the marriage (BCP 420). Because this is not required by the rubrics, please forgo this practice during the pandemic.

If the attendees number more than just the immediate family, advise them against the normal receiving line (again, this is consistent with CDC and the governor's guidelines.)

Should you as a potential celebrant feel that officiating a marriage service would compromise your health or that of a member of your household, or if you expect that those attending will not honor the distancing or mask requirements, please know that the Bishop will support you in declining to do the service.

### Ministration at the Time of Death

Much of how you approach this rite depends on the situation of the dying person. Is the person in the hospital or an assisted living facility? You must follow the protocols that they establish as to how – if at all – you can be with them for this rite. Rubrically, the whole of this liturgy can be done remotely. Many priests have done this over the phone when patients were dying due to COVID-19, where a nurse has held the phone up so that the sick person can hear the voice and the prayers. If family members can be conferenced in to the call, they may be able to join you in the prayers.

If the terminal illness is not due to COVID-19, you may go to the bedside to offer the Ministration at the Time of Death. Consider prayerfully the vulnerability of everyone in the household you visit, as well as your own vulnerability and that of your household.

When you make such a visit, wear a mask for the protection of others as well as yourself. Anointing with oil is not required by the rubrics. If you choose to anoint, sanitize your hands before and afterward.

You may bring the Reserved Sacrament in one kind only to the bedside for a final Eucharist. Sanitize hands before and after giving the wafer. Note the rubric at the bottom of p 457 in the BCP, "*If a person desires to receive the Sacrament, but, by reason of extreme sickness or physical disability, is unable to eat and drink the Bread and Wine, the Celebrant is to assure that person that all the benefits of Communion are received, even though the Sacrament is not received with the mouth.*"

## **Burial Rite**

For the time being, it is preferable that the Burial Office be conducted in an outdoor graveside service. This should be done with the smallest number of people possible, with the understanding that a Memorial Service/Celebration of Life can be done in the church at a later point in time. Given the fact that those who attend the service, or who want to attend the service, may be in a vulnerable age category, it is critically important that those who may have been exposed to COVID-19 or who may have symptoms be excluded from participation. The same requirements for wearing masks and keeping appropriate physical distancing are extant. This will be difficult: we hear from those who have done these services that our need for physical contact and comfort in grief means that people keep edging closer to comfort each other, even if they do not live in the same household.

The Burial Office can be conducted in the church if the congregation has been approved for Phase II regathering, following all the protocols for masking, distancing, and no physical contact. The number of attendees should be limited to the number that was already determined as the maximum for your space; a lesser number is always preferable. The spiritual Eucharist may be celebrated but the sacrament will not be distributed. If there is no Eucharist, go directly from the prayers (BCP 480-481 or BCP 497-498) to the Commendation and Committal (BCP 482 ff. or 499ff.) As mentioned for weddings, a priest's ability to exert authority to require distance and masks, etc., may be more limited in such a situation, given the presence of non-parishioners, than might be true with parishioners

As with Phase II in-church services of Morning Prayer, AnteCommunion, or Spiritual Eucharist, the whole of the service should be available as a paper document, or as a digital one easily accessed on smart phones or tablets, or projected on a screen. Music may include an instrumentalist and a soloist, properly distanced, but there shall be no congregational singing.

## **Pastoral Care and the Rite of Reconciliation**

Most pastoral care interactions can be done via telephone, FaceTime, Skype or Zoom. While it feels strange, it is the safest way to interact with a parishioner. Remember that you carry any potential harmful agents from people you have interacted with. An elderly homebound parishioner may not have had physical interaction with anyone for the whole time we have been advised to stay home to stay safe. You would not want to cause harm by inadvertently exposing that parishioner to something harmful.

Similarly, everyone with whom you interact has an impact on your own health as well as that of your household. Consider the health of everyone as you discern how best to serve someone in need of pastoral care.

Should a person desire the rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent, the rubrics suggest that this must be in-person, although it is not required to be in the church building. Should you choose to offer this rite, you may sit close enough to hear while still maintaining distance for safety's sake. Both parties must wear masks. You may briefly place your hand on the head of the penitent for the prayer after Absolution (BCP

451) and then resume a position of distancing. Again, consider your level of vulnerability and that of the penitent as you discern whether or not you feel able to provide this rite.

Note that for baptisms, weddings and funerals, there should be NO reception indoors or outdoors on church property after the service.

### **A Final Word**

All of these guidelines are subject to change based upon a change in circumstance, such as a spike in cases of COVID-19 in your health district. If for reasons of vulnerability you cannot offer pastoral care in person, you usually have the option of providing care telephonically or on a digital platform. This is not the case for baptism, weddings, or the Burial Office, but you can still support those involved as much as possible. You cannot be forced to minister in a way that will create undue risk to yourself or those with whom you live. If you are having a challenge in convincing someone in your congregation of this, please know that your Bishops will support your decision fully. If there is a question, your diocesan leadership is there to answer it for you.

**Specific permission for these rites is not required as long as this guidance is adhered to.** Please do reach out and ask if you have a question.

Blessings, and thanks for your faithful work for God's people and God's church and this Diocese.