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Virginia Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## **Gathering Again: Guidance for Congregational Leaders in the Virginia Synod, ELCA May 14, 2020**

We know everyone is eager to gather in-person for worship and that Safer at Home Phase 1 of Forward Virginia allows for religious organizations to gather again at 50% capacity. However, the highly infectious nature of COVID-19, the lack of available testing, the absence of an effective treatment for the disease, and the time needed to prepare for gathering again leads the **Bishop's Office to recommend abstaining from in-person gatherings through Forward Virginia Safer at Home Phase 1, Phase 2, and possibly beyond.** As each new Phase of reopening occurs in Virginia, congregational leaders will need to consider how to protect the health and well-being of the entire community, not simply do what is allowable or legal.

**As you prepare to gather again when it is safer and legal, please remember these considerations:**

- Our objective is NOT to return to in-person gatherings. **Our call is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ!** As followers of Jesus, we also have a call to protect our members and the wider community. ([Galatians 5:13-14](#))
- If we are distracted by our own desires, financial concerns, or the noise around us, **we may find ourselves working hard to gather again only to discover in doing so we put the most vulnerable in our congregations and communities at greater risk.** We must not let that happen. ([Philippians 2:3-4](#))
- **The risks of COVID-19 come primarily from the air we breathe;** COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets (meaning moisture that comes from talking, singing, coughing and sneezing) and the aerosol - literally, the air we share, (talking and breathing). This article provides a helpful overview of the science around potential transmission: [The Risks - Know Them - Avoid Them](#)
- We are **obligated to follow the legal and medical directives** provided by governing authorities. An updated list of requirements can be found at: <https://www.virginia.gov/coronavirus/forwardvirginia/#856622>
- Check with your **insurance carrier** to examine their guidelines to limit your liability risks.
- **Clearly communicate** all of your plans multiple times, ways and places.
- Develop a plan to **notify the congregation** if someone in a gathering develops COVID-19.
- Be sure to develop **clear expectations and guidelines for outside groups** using church facilities.
- Remember that pandemics often come in waves that **may require a retreat from our progress** in gathering again to an earlier phase or “stay-at-home” orders.

### **Gathering Again for Worship**

**For the foreseeable future, the safest way to gather for worship is online.** Congregations are encouraged to continue to offer digital worship opportunities through all Phases of Forward Virginia and beyond.

While the Office of the Bishop recommends not gathering for worship in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of Forward Virginia, **now is the time to prepare** for the future. The Virginia Synod staff prepared a Gathering Again document, but, after reviewing **ELCA Considerations**, based on Federal Guidelines, we decided not to duplicate their efforts. While the ELCA guidance does not align exactly with the Forward Virginia Phases of reopening, it is thorough, linked to additional resources and can be easily adapted to fit guidance from our Synod and the Forward Virginia Phases. **We ask that you carefully read and follow ELCA Considerations before gathering again in-person in any context.** Go to: [vasynod.org/gathering-again](https://vasynod.org/gathering-again) for document links.

For a quick snapshot of how the Virginia Synod Office of the Bishop guidance on gathering again applies to the Commonwealth of Virginia's Phased Plan for Reopening, **see the following chart.**

# GATHERING AGAIN

A guide for congregational leaders | May 2020



	PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3	PHASE 4
RESTRICTION LEVEL	STRICT	SIGNIFICANT	LIMITED	RENEWAL
<b>Timeline</b> 	As declared by the Virginia Governor – Friday May 15, 2020	As declared by the Virginia Governor	As declared by the Virginia Governor – and continues until an effective treatment or vaccine is available	
<b>Worship</b> 	In person gathering NOT RECOMMENDED		Review and follow ELCA guidelines	<p><i>We see the Holy Spirit using this crisis to bring about welcome opportunities to refocus and reprioritize who we are, why we exist, and to what we are called</i></p>
CONTINUE online, recorded, and/or printed worship resources for those unable or unwilling to attend				
<b>Distancing</b> 	6 feet of separation	Follow ALL of the most up-to-date Virginia, CDC, US and local directives for a safer gathering		
	Seating in every 3rd pew only			
<b>Communion</b> 	Do NOT celebrate Holy Communion		WAFER ONLY	
<b>Pastors, Deacons, + Staff</b> 	Work primarily from home		Return to workplace – on a limited basis	
Staff in high risk status work primarily from home				
<b>Visiting</b> 	NO hospital/care facility visits, homebound communion		Limited visits and homebound communion (MASKS!)	