

# GATHERING AGAIN

Guidance for Congregational Leaders  
in the Virginia Synod, ELCA for Phase 3

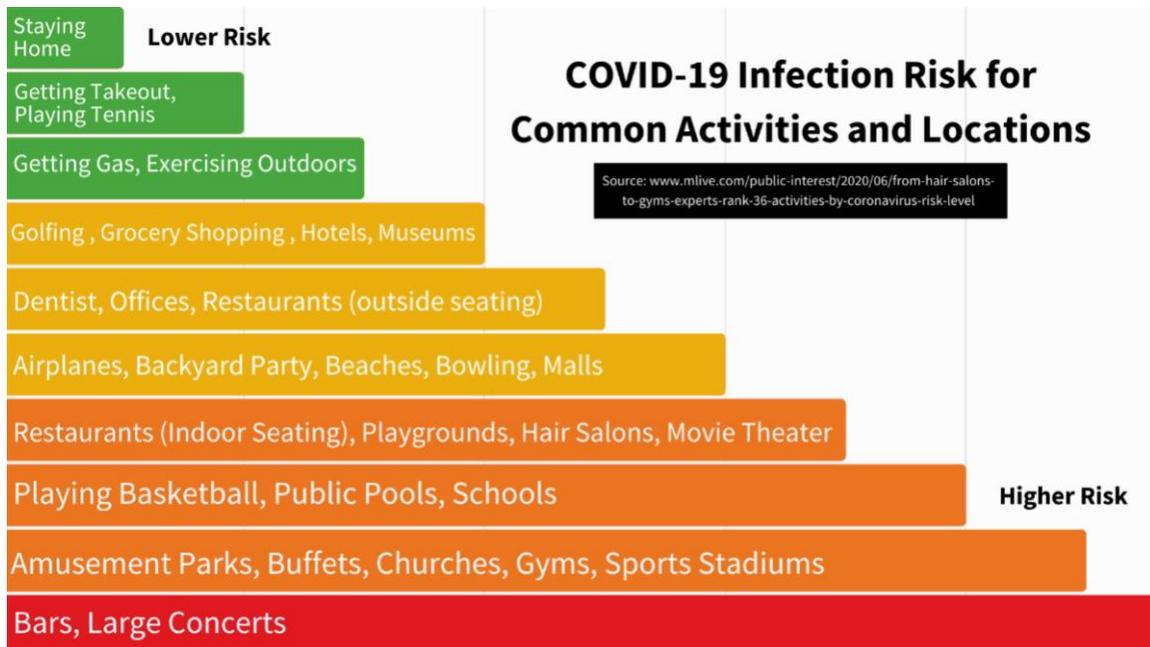


## June 25, 2020

As legal barriers to gathering again in-person are relaxed, the Office of the Bishop acknowledges the understandable desire to gather in-person. Therefore, we encourage congregations to work together to establish a culture of care, grounded in love for God and love for neighbor, which protects members of your congregations and the wider community.

Since there is currently no vaccine or highly effective treatment for COVID-19, the risk from the virus remains high. Recent spikes in infections around the country raise serious concerns. It appears we may be living with this virus and necessary protective restrictions for a long time. It would be a mistake to act as if we are much safer than feared and the need for extreme caution unnecessary. **Unfortunately, practices which are typically a part of corporate worship are extremely effective in spreading COVID-19.**

Since transmission of COVID-19 comes primarily from the air we breathe, spending approximately an hour inside a building, speaking in unison, singing in unison, listening to people speak loudly, potentially sharing hugs and handshakes, passing items from one person to another, and sitting in close proximity to one another means that gathering for worship using typical practices is far riskier than making a trip to the store or going to a local pool.



While each congregation has the opportunity to weigh the risks of gathering again in-person and make a decision about what is legal under Forward Virginia Phase 3 and appropriate in their context, the Office of the Bishop urges you to remember that as followers of Jesus our call is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to go and make disciples, and to love our neighbor, not to fill buildings with people.

The safest option is to continue to refrain from in-person worship. The next best option would be to gather in your cars in the parking lot or outside with separation and masks enforced. In any case, we recommend not passing items from one person to another, refraining from Holy Communion or at least using a wafer-only communion.

Even if some are able to gather, please continue to offer online or email worship to those who can't gather in-person. Caring for others should be our primary concern, not satisfying our desire to gather.

If you choose to gather again in-person under Forward Virginia Phase 3, **consider experimenting with different approaches to worship that are rooted in caring for one another and loving your neighbor.** In this moment, we have an opportunity to experiment and to learn how to live out our mission and our core values in worship while also demonstrating a commitment to being a caring community.

**Whether you move outside for worship or continue to worship indoors, remember that you are legally obligated to follow directives around gathering in-person provided by state and local officials** and, you are ethically obligated to avoid anything that could endanger others. Please... keep a safe distance; wear your mask; don't touch others; wash your hands and be very careful for the sake of those most at risk. We WILL gather in-person again safely, but until then, we respond to God's love by loving others in God's name.

Suggestions for how to resume care-filled worship are available on the Virginia Synod website: [vasynod.org/covid-19](https://vasynod.org/covid-19)

- [Governor Northam Guidance for Virginia Forward Phase 3\(Religious Services Section begins on Page 32\)](#)
- [Resuming Care-filled Worship and Sacramental Life: June 2020](#)
- [ELCA Considerations for Returning to In-Person Worship](#)