

Dear church leaders and members,

The following is a summary of recent actions and articles that have compelled us to create the accompanying documents for our church.

On May 23, 2020 Governor Tim Walz signed Emergency Executive Order 20-62 Amending Executive Order 20-56 to Allow Worship, Weddings, and Funerals to Proceed as Safely as Possible during the COVID-19 Peacetime Emergency. This amendment states:

1. Paragraph 6.c of Executive Order 20-56 is amended by adding the following subparagraph 6.c.v:
 - v. Effective on May 26, 2020 at 11:59 pm, places of worship, funeral homes, and other venues that offer gathering space for weddings, funerals, or planned services such as worship, rituals, prayer meetings, or scripture studies, may host such weddings, funerals, or services with over 10 people, provided that they adhere to the below requirements:
 - A. In all settings, ensure a minimum of 6 feet of physical distancing between households.
 - B. In indoor settings, occupancy must not exceed 25 percent of the normal occupant capacity as determined by the fire marshal, with a maximum of 250 people in a single self-contained space.
 - C. In outdoor settings, gatherings must not exceed 250 individuals.
 - D. Develop and implement a COVID-19 Preparedness Plan in accordance with guidance developed by the Minnesota Department of Health, available at <https://mn.gov/deed/guidance>.
2. All other provisions of Executive Order 20-56 remain in effect.

On May 28, 2020, the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) published versions of *Industry Guidance for Safely Reopening* for several kinds of businesses and organizations including *Faith-based Communities, Places of Worship, Weddings, and Funerals*. This document can be found at https://mn.gov/deed/assets/worship-guidance-ACC_tcm1045-433301.pdf

This is the regulation that our bishop, Rev. Regina Hassanally, has designated we need to adhere to in order to have in-person worship again (email letter sent to me dated Tuesday, May 26, 2020, which I forwarded to you on Wednesday, May 27).

Bishop Hassanally also recommends that we follow the guidelines in the ELCA essay *Considerations for Returning to In-person Worship, Being Church Together During the COVID-19 Pandemic Updated May 12, 2020*. In addition, she commends *Guidelines for Phased Reopening of Churches in West Texas* which was prepared by the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas. Both of these papers can be found on the synod website at <http://semnsynod.org/15628-2/>

The Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry has prepared COVID-19 Preparedness Plan templates. They are available at <https://dli.mn.gov/updates>. The templates are detailed, maybe too detailed for our setting. That said, and all things considered, a lengthy plan is necessary in order to comply with both social and spiritual policies and practices.

The following COVID-19 Preparedness Plan draws heavily on all these articles.

COVID-19 Preparedness Plan for Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Lanesboro, Minnesota

Prologue

The novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is still circulating in our community, state, nation, and the world. While the scientific community, public health officials, and state and federal governments work to distribute accurate and widely available testing as well as study the virus and develop a reliable vaccine, we need to continue to observe practices that protect everyone, including those who are most vulnerable.

Discussions and decisions about public worship and in-person church gatherings must take place with the following premise in mind: if we are out in public, we are at risk, and risk can only be minimized, not eliminated.

Future resurgences of COVID-19 cases may result in our church indeed all churches being required to return to no in-person worship and stay-at-home restrictions for everyone.

About Our Plan

Bethlehem Lutheran Church is committed to providing a safe and healthy worship and meeting place for our pastoral staff, support staff, parishioners, and guests. To ensure we have a safe and healthy worship and meeting place, we have developed the following COVID-19 Preparedness Plan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pastoral and support staff and the church council are all responsible for implementing this plan. Our goal is to lessen the potential for transmission of COVID-19 in our church and community, and that requires full cooperation among our pastor, deacon, custodian, church council, church members, and visitors. Only through this cooperative effort can we establish and maintain the safety and health of all people attending our church.

Our COVID-19 Preparedness Plan follows State of Minnesota Industry Guidance for our type of organization, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Guidelines, federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards related to safety and health precautions required in response to COVID-19, and applicable executive orders. The plan addresses the following:

- identifying sick church workers and ensuring sick church workers stay home.
- protocols for church worker hygiene and source controls.
- protocols for church worker physical distancing.
- protocols for drop-off, pick-up, and delivery of mail and packages.
- protocols for the church building, cleaning, and disinfecting.
- protocols for protecting parishioners and guests.
- protocols for managing occupancy.
- protocols for worship services and practices.

Throughout this document, the term “church worker” or church workers” refer to pastoral staff, support staff, and others who do work at the church. “Employee” and “staff” are additional terms which will be used interchangeably with “church worker”. “Employees” and “staff” will be used interchangeably with “church workers”.

Protocols for identifying sick employees/staff and ensuring sick employees/staff stay home

- Church workers are encouraged to self-check, that is, to self-monitor for signs and symptoms of COVID-19.
 - Symptoms of COVID-19 can include fever greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, or loss of taste or smell. Other less common symptoms include gastrointestinal symptoms like nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea.
- Church workers will use the Minnesota Department of Health's (MDH) Visitor and Employee Health Screening Checklist (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facilityhlthscreen.pdf) to self-evaluate. This screening also addresses close contacts with confirmed cases and quarantined cases, and recent out of continent travel. Church workers are advised to stay home if they have had any exposure.
- If a church worker begins to feel unwell while in the facility, then that individual must leave immediately, return home, and isolate themselves.
- Church workers with any new or worsening signs and symptoms, listed above, will not be able to return to work until the following criteria are met:
 - An employee/staff diagnosed with COVID-19 may return to work when all three of the following criteria are met: 1) at least three days (72 hours) have passed since recovery (resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications); 2) respiratory symptoms improve (e.g., cough, shortness of breath); and 3) at least 7 days have passed since symptoms first appeared;
 - An employee/staff who has symptoms that could be COVID-19, but does not get evaluated by a medical professional or tested for COVID-19 is assumed to have COVID-19 and cannot return to work until the individual meets the same three-step criteria listed above;
 - An employee/staff who has symptoms that could be COVID-19 and wants to return to work before completing the above self-isolation period must obtain a medical professional's note clearing the individual for return based on an alternative diagnosis.
- A church worker who has been in close contact with a household member or other person who is lab-confirmed to have COVID-19 will not be allowed to return to work until the end of a 14-day self-quarantine period, from the last date of exposure.
- Once again, church workers are encouraged to self-identify. Bethlehem Lutheran Church will not make unnecessary medical inquiries. Bethlehem Lutheran Church requests that a church worker who is ill stay home to reduce other workers' risk of exposure.
- If an employee/staff has been exposed to COVID-19 in the facility or who may be ill, then the congregation president is the exclusive person who communicates with and gathers information from that church worker to ensure that the privacy of the employee/staff is maintained.

- The congregation president will follow the CDC process to identify contact between infected church workers and other employees/staff who may have been exposed. (CDC Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers Responding to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), May 2020 (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html)).

Protocols for employee/staff hygiene and source controls

- Hand Washing and Sanitizing
 - Handwashing and hand-sanitizer services will be readily available and appropriately stocked with soap, sanitizer, disposable towels, disinfecting wipes, etc.
 - Church workers must wash and/or sanitize their hands upon entering the church facilities.
 - Church workers are strongly encouraged to frequently wash and/or sanitize their hands while in the facilities.
- Recommended and appropriate protective supplies, such as non-medical cloth face coverings, gloves, disinfectant, shields, etc., will be provided.
- “Hand-washing” and “cover your cough” signs will be posted. See: www.health.state.mn.us/people/cyc/index.html and www.health.state.mn.us/people/handhygiene/materials.html.
- Church workers will wear cloth face coverings or non-medical grade face masks over their nose and mouth especially when visitors to the office space are present.
- Tissues for proper cough/sneeze etiquette and no-touch disposal bins will be provided.
- Food will not be shared communally. Church workers who are members of the same household are exempted.

Protocols for employee/staff physical distancing

- Church workers who can work from home must work from home.
- Flexible work time is strongly encouraged to reduce the number of church workers in the same place at the same time.
- Church workers must maintain at least 6 feet of separation from other individuals. Church workers who are members of the same household are exempted.
- Church workers will maintain physical distancing as much as possible when working together to adapt a physical space, prepare for an event, etc.
- Physical space between church workers and parishioners and visitors must be increased to at least 6 feet whenever interacting.
- Staff and other meetings should be limited to 10 people or less.
- Only one person in a lavatory/restroom at the same time.

Protocols for drop-off, pick-up, and delivery of mail and packages

- All mail and deliveries for the church come through the United States Postal Service, or another delivery service.
- Mail and deliveries are received via a contactless method using the church's post office box, the parsonage mailbox, or the parsonage front porch/doorstep.
- Only occasionally is there need for close contact between pastoral staff and postal workers or delivery personnel.
- Pastoral staff will maintain a distance of 6-feet or greater from others during interactions while receiving mail or exchanging deliveries.
- Pastoral staff will minimize exchanging or sharing of scanners, pens, or other tools with postal workers or delivery personnel.

Protocols for the church building, cleaning, and disinfecting

- The custodian and property team will be given State of Minnesota and CDC documents regarding building and ventilation, and cleaning and disinfecting procedures. It shall be their responsibility to determine what surfaces or objects need to be cleaned and/or disinfected and with what equipment and product.
- Regular housekeeping practices have continued since the pandemic was announced. Other practices are now being implemented including the following:
 - Handwashing and hand-sanitizer services will be readily available and appropriately stocked with soap, sanitizer, disposable towels, disinfecting wipes, etc.
 - Easily visible signs explaining hygiene best practices including signs for young children will be posted.
 - Only one person in a lavatory/restroom at the same time. Members of the same household are exempted (e.g. parent and child).
 - The custodian and property team are strongly encouraged to create a sanitation schedule and checklist, identifying surfaces and equipment to be sanitized, the agent to be used, and the frequency at which sanitation occurs.
 - Areas such as offices, lavatories/restrooms, common areas, shared electronic equipment, instruments, tools, controls, etc., will be regularly cleaned and disinfected.
 - Electronic devices must be sanitized only when disconnected from the power-source and sanitized in accordance with the listing/labeling requirements. Light-switches and circuit-breakers will not be sanitized with a liquid agent.
 - It is recommended that switches/devices be covered with a poly-covering that allows the user to manipulate the switch/device without touching it. The poly-covering should be changed out frequently.
 - Personal equipment, items used in rituals or services, microphones, and phones should not be shared or, if shared, should be disinfected after each use.

- High-touch items such as doorknobs, countertops, railings, handles, ends of pews, backs of pews, tops of pews, tops of chairs, and other surfaces will be frequently cleaned.
- Immediate cleaning and disinfecting of the work and gathering space will be performed if an employee/staff, church member, or visitor becomes ill with COVID-19. See CDC's Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html).
- Only safe and effective cleansers and disinfectants will be used. The custodian and property team will consult The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) **List N** for products that meet EPA's criteria for use against SARS-CoV-2. (www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2).
- Product labels and Safety Data Sheets will be read, manufacturer specifications will be followed, and the custodian will use required personal protective equipment for the product.
- No meals, food, or drinks of any kind shall be provided before, during, or after worship services or other meetings. This includes gatherings both indoors and outdoors.

Protocols for protecting parishioners and guests

- Identifying sick church members and visitors and ensuring sick church members and visitors stay home
 - Church members and visitors are asked to conduct a self-check, that is, they must self-monitor for signs and symptoms of COVID-19, and to stay home if they have symptoms.
 - Symptoms of COVID-19 can include fever greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, or loss of taste or smell. Other less common symptoms include gastrointestinal symptoms like nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea.
 - Church members and visitors will be asked to use the Minnesota Department of Health's (MDH) Visitor and Employee Health Screening Checklist (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facilityhlthscreen.pdf) to self-evaluate. This screening also addresses close contacts with confirmed cases and quarantined cases, and recent out of continent travel. Church members and visitors are advised to stay home if they have had any exposure.
 - Notices will be posted stating that if church members and visitors do not feel well, have any symptoms compatible with COVID-19 or any other illness, then they should not attend services.
 - Persons who may be at higher risk for severe illness are strongly encouraged to stay home.
 - The at-risk population is anyone 65 years old or older, and anyone with chronic lung disease; moderate to severe asthma; chronic heart disease; severe obesity; diabetes; chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis; liver disease; or weakened immune system. (See www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/

[2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/ people-at-higher-risk.html](https://www.cdc.gov/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html)).

- Church members and visitors who have a household member experiencing symptoms compatible with COVID-19, or any other illness, should not attend services. Refer to the CDC's What to Do if You are Sick or Caring for Someone Who is Sick ([www.cdc.gov/ coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/index.html)).
- If a church member has even one household member experiencing symptoms compatible with COVID-19 or any other illness, then the entire family unit must stay home.
- If a church member or visitor begins to feel unwell while in the facility, they should leave immediately, return home, and isolate themselves. See the CDC's Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers Responding to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), May 2020 ([www.cdc.gov/ coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html)).
- Ushers will write down the names of church members and, if possible, obtain the names and addresses of visitors, for the purpose of contact tracing, should the need arise.
- Hand Washing and Sanitizing
 - Church members and visitors must wash and/or sanitize their hands upon entering the church facilities.
 - Church members and visitors are strongly encouraged to frequently wash and/or sanitize their hands while in the facilities.
 - Handwashing and hand-sanitizer services will be readily available and appropriately stocked with soap, sanitizer, disposable towels, disinfecting wipes, etc.
 - Open restrooms will have adequate and available cleaning supplies for any diaper changing station.
- Face Coverings and Masks
 - Church members and visitors are required to wear a face covering or mask when in the facility and during services when they are able.
 - A limited supply of extra masks will be available for people who do not arrive with one.
 - Cloth face coverings are NOT a substitute for maintaining a physical distance of 6-feet from other people. Refer to CDC guidance on cloth face coverings ([www.cdc.gov/ coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html)).
- Physical Distancing
 - Church members and visitors must always maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from people not in the same household. This includes establishing this distance with people next to you and in front and behind you. This means that
 - two or more members of the same household can sit adjacent to one another, with 6 feet of empty space on either side of the group, and
 - worshippers must leave approximately every other row empty.

- Ushers will direct church members and visitors entering and exiting the worship space/seating area to maintain proper physical distancing. Seating will be blocked off and clearly marked within the worship space/seating area to ensure adequate spacing of worshippers.
- Occupancy Limits and Physical Distancing
 - Worship space/seating area occupancy will be reduced to accommodate for the required physical distancing of at least 6 feet between people who do not live in the same household.
 - For indoor settings, occupancy must not exceed 25% of total capacity, with a maximum of 250 people in a single self-contained space. Outdoor gatherings must not exceed 250 people.
 - These limits include leadership, assistants, and worshippers for all planned services, baptisms, weddings, and funerals.
- Worship Aids
 - Hymnals and Bibles will be removed from the worship space since they cannot be effectively cleaned.
 - A full-service paper bulletin will be distributed in a way that minimizes contact by anyone but the individual worshipper.
 - The order of worship, prayers, liturgy, readings, and lyrics for the service will be projected on a screen.
 - Electronic copies of the texts used for the service will be available to worshippers to access on their personal devices prior to the service.
- Worship Practices
 - Certain routines and rituals will be modified or suspended to avoid physical contact or passing objects between ministers and worshippers or between individuals.
 - There will be no shaking of hands, hugging, fist-bumping, high-fiving, etc., to greet one another before, during, or after services, whether in the building or elsewhere on the church premises.
 - Speaking and singing will be permitted but only while wearing face coverings or masks.
 - There will be no passing of collection plates. Plates will be located at entrances/exits to allow worshippers to give their offering by dropping it into the plate or other container without touching it.
 - Church members are strongly encouraged to make use of pre-arranged giving through their bank, Vanco Payment Solutions, and/or their personal device application, "GivePlus Mobile".
 - There will be no celebration of Holy Communion until further notice.

- Fellowship, Faith Formation Classes, and Outreach
 - In-person fellowship, coffee hour, snacks, Bible studies, Sunday School, Confirmation, WELCA, etc. are still suspended until further notice. This includes children, youth, and all other meetings, gatherings, and programs outside of worship. Bible studies and other faith formation may take place online.
 - Outreach ministries (e.g. community groups, support groups, etc.) that are meeting an immediate need can gather in the church facilities if these groups abide by the protocols for safety and health listed above.
- Virtual Worship
 - Even as some of our church members begin to attend services in-person, other members may not feel comfortable resuming in-person services. We respect their decisions. For that reason, worship services will continue to be live-streamed or recorded and posted online to accommodate vulnerable church and community members.
 - “At risk” employees/staff and church members are strongly urged to stay home and participate in services remotely.
- Baptisms, Weddings, and Funerals
 - Baptisms, weddings, and funerals, including graveside services, are permitted.
 - Families and attendees must agree to abide by the same sanitizing, physical distancing, worship service protocols, precautions, and guidelines listed above.
 - Additional handwashing and/or sanitizing will take place before the administration of water, the laying on of hands, and anointing at a baptism.
 - Pastoral staff will coordinate with funeral home staff to meet their protocols as well as ours.

Communication and training protocols

- This COVID-19 Preparedness Plan will be shared with and reviewed by all employees/staff and the church council.
- All employees/staff and the church council will be trained regarding COVID-19 exposure, as well as applicable policies, procedures, practices, and protocols.
- Employees/staff must comply with and follow established rules and practices.
- This COVID-19 Preparedness Plan will be posted in easily accessible and viewable locations inside the facilities.
- The measures being taken to protect church members to lessen the spread of COVID-19 will be communicated in printed and digital forms at least 2 weeks prior to, and at the start of, in-person worship or other gatherings to both educate and inform them of their role in protecting themselves and others.
- All necessary or required rules and practices will be communicated to other users or renters of the facilities (e.g. community groups, support groups, etc.).
- All protocols will be provided in written form to each person attending services – church members and visitors – before they enter the building.