



Interim Guidance for Places of Worship and Religious Services (March 26, 2021)

Guidelines for Places of Worship: Many places of worship are planning to return to in-person worship in the months ahead. With this, continued prevention efforts to mitigate the risk of spread are essential given any place where people gather together poses a risk for COVID-19 transmission. The guidance below will help places of worship reduce the spread of COVID-19 in their communities.

If the place of worship offers child care or educational programming for children and youth, please follow CDC [guidance](#) for those settings.

For more resources for faith leaders, please see the NCDHHS's Faith Leader [toolkit](#). This is an online resource of 10 actions that leaders can take to help slow the spread of COVID-19 in their communities. The toolkit also contains materials and templates that can be shared with your congregation and faith community, including multiple resources on vaccinations.

This guidance covers the following topics:

- Social Distancing and Minimizing Exposure
- Cloth Face Coverings
- Cleaning and Hygiene
- Monitoring for Symptoms
- Protecting Vulnerable Populations
- Combatting Misinformation
- Vaccines Additional Resources

Social Distancing and Minimizing Exposure

[Social distancing](#) is a key tool to decrease the spread of COVID-19. Social distancing (“physical distancing”) means keeping space between yourself and other people outside of your home. Stay at least 6 feet (about 2 arms’ length) from other people; do not gather in groups; stay out of crowded places and avoid mass gatherings.

It is recommended that places of worship:

- Consider conducting the worship service through lower risk options, such as virtual services or conducting the service outdoor.
- When conducting service in-person, space out seating to ensure individuals or families are at least 6ft apart from anyone outside of their household. Consider limiting seating to alternative rows

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- Consider limiting occupancy to 50% of the stated fire capacity, (If there is not a fire capacity number for the room, limit occupancy to 12 people per 1,000 square feet).
- Encourage everyone to remain seated as much as possible and to stay 6ft away from others outside of their household when entering and leaving the service.
- Post signage reminding people about social distancing. [Know Your W's](#) sign templates are available in English and Spanish on the NC DHHS COVID-19 response site.
- Do not allow singing or choir, as risk of viral spread is increased by increased respiratory effort.
- In the event singing does occur, ensure members of a choir or music ensemble maintain a distance of at least 6 feet or greater from each other and that air flow is directed away from others
- Encourage avoidance of physical contact among attendees as permissible within the community's faith tradition.
- In indoor and outdoor areas where people gather, provide floor markings at six-foot intervals to encourage social distancing.
- Clearly mark designated entry and exit points; if a house of worship or building has only one entry/exit point, stagger entry and exit times if possible.
- Increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible by opening windows and doors, using fans, or other methods.
 - Position fans securely and carefully in or near windows so as not to induce potentially contaminated airflow directly from one person over another (strategic window fan placement in exhaust mode can help draw fresh air into room via other open windows and doors without generating strong room air currents). Do not open windows and doors if they pose a safety risk. Consider implementing other ventilation and indoor air strategies as outlined in [Interim Guidance for Ventilation/Air Quality](#).
- Continue remote working for staff as much as possible. This includes clergy holding virtual visits by phone or online when possible. Stagger shifts where remote working is not possible.
- Provide education for staff on how to properly wear, remove, and wash face coverings.
- Gatherings such as religious classes, youth events, support groups, or other programming should be held virtually to ensure social distancing.

Cloth Face Coverings

It is strongly recommended that all staff and congregants wear a cloth face covering when they may be near (less than 6 feet from) other people. If and when this happens, ensure as much as possible that this is for a brief time interval, and always less than 15 minutes. An FAQ about face coverings is available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

- It is encouraged that places of worship provide cloth face coverings for staff and congregants. If provided, they must be single use or properly laundered using hot water and a high heat dryer between uses.
- Please share guidance to employees on use, wearing, and removal of cloth face coverings, such as [CDC's guidance on wearing and removing cloth face masks](#), [CDC's use of cloth face coverings](#), and [CDC's cloth face coverings FAQ's](#).

Cleaning and Hygiene

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Washing hands with soap for 20 seconds or using hand sanitizer reduces the risk of transmission through contaminated hands.

It is recommended that places of worship:

- Perform ongoing and routine environmental cleaning and disinfection of high-touch areas (e.g., doors, doorknobs, rails) with an [EPA approved disinfectant for SARS-CoV-2](#) (the virus that causes COVID-19), and increase disinfection during peak times or high density times.
- Systematically and frequently check and refill hand sanitizers and assure soap and hand drying materials are available at sinks.
- Prominently provide alcohol-based hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol) at entrances and exits and near high-touch areas.
- Promote frequent use of hand washing and hand sanitizer for staff and attendees. Require handwashing of staff immediately upon reporting to work, after contact with individuals, after performing cleaning and disinfecting activities, and frequently throughout the day.
- To the extent possible, do not use items that are not easily cleaned, sanitized, or disinfected.
- Limit the use of frequently touched objects such as worship aids, prayer books, hymnals, attendance registers, or other shared or passed items. Encourage congregants to bring their own prayers, bulletins, songs and texts through electronic means if possible.
- Consider a stationary collection box, or mail or electronic methods of collecting financial contributions instead of shared or passed collection trays or baskets.
- All shared religious objects should be properly disinfected between uses as possible. Provide adequate contact time for disinfectant as required by the manufacturer before shared equipment is used by another person.
- Provide tissues for proper cough and sneeze hygiene.
- If food is offered at any event, have pre-packaged boxes or bags for each attendee, instead of a buffet or family-style meal. Avoid serving food from common dishes.

Monitoring for Symptoms

Conducting regular screening for symptoms can help reduce exposure. Staff, volunteers, congregants, and visitors should be encouraged to self-monitor for symptoms such as fever, cough, or shortness of breath. Staff, volunteers, congregants and visitors should not come to the place of worship if they have symptoms of COVID-19.

If staff or volunteers develop symptoms while at place of worship, they should notify their supervisor and return home. Congregants or visitors with symptoms should be instructed to return home as well. More information on [how to monitor for symptoms](#) is available from the CDC.

It is recommended that places of worship:

- Have a plan in place for immediately separating visitors or congregants from others if symptoms develop.
- Have a plan in place for immediately removing employees or volunteers from work if symptoms develop.
- Employees or volunteers who have symptoms when they arrive at work or become sick during the day should immediately be separated from other employees, volunteers, congregants, and/or visitors and sent home

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- ❑ Post signage at the main entrance requesting that people who have been symptomatic with fever and/or cough not enter, such as [Know Your Ws/Stop if You Have Symptoms](#) flyers (English - [Color, Black & White](#); Spanish - [Color, Black & White](#)).
- ❑ Establish and enforce sick leave policies to prevent the spread of disease, including:
 - Enforcing employees staying home if sick.
 - Encouraging liberal use of sick leave policy.
 - Expanding paid leave policies to allow employees to stay home when sick.
- ❑ [Per CDC guidelines](#), if an employee or volunteer has been diagnosed with COVID-19 or is presumed positive by a medical professional due to symptoms, the employee or volunteer should be excluded from work/place of worship until:
 - No fever for at least 24 hours since recovery (without the use of fever-reducing medicine) AND
 - Other symptoms have improved (e.g., coughing, shortness of breath) AND
 - At least 10 days have passed since first symptoms

***A test-based strategy is no longer recommended to discontinue isolation or precautions and employers should not require documentation of a negative test before allowing a worker to return.**

- ❑ [Per CDC guidelines](#), if an employee or volunteer has been diagnosed with COVID-19 but does not have symptoms, they should remain out of work/should not return to the place of worship until 10 days have passed since the date of their first positive COVID-19 diagnostic test, assuming they have not subsequently developed symptoms since their positive test.
- ❑ Require symptomatic employees, volunteers, congregants, and visitors to wear masks until leaving the facility. Cleaning and disinfecting procedure should be implemented by designated personnel following [CDC guidelines](#) once sick employee leaves.
- ❑ Provide employees volunteers, congregants, and visitors with information on help lines to access information or other support in reference to COVID-19, e.g. 211 and Hope4NC Helpline (1-855-587-3463).

Place of worship can consider :

- ❑ Conducting daily [symptom](#) screening (use this standard interview questionnaire) ([English](#) | [Spanish](#)) of employees at entrance to workplace with immediately sending symptomatic workers home to [isolate](#).

Protecting Vulnerable Populations

Information on who is at higher risk for severe disease is available from the [CDC](#) and [NCDHHS](#).

It is recommended that places of worship:

- ❑ Encourage the use of virtual services or designate exclusive times to access services for seniors and other at-risk groups as defined by the CDC.
- ❑ Enable employees to self-identify as high risk for severe disease and if so reassign work to telework, minimize face-to-face contact, or otherwise maintain a distance of six feet from others.
- ❑ Offer provisions for persons at higher risk such as how to minimize interaction with patrons, social distancing and spacing reminders, recommending wearing a cloth face covering.

Combatting Misinformation

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Help ensure that the information your employees, volunteers, congregants, and visitors are getting is coming directly from reliable resources. Use resources from a trusted source like the [CDC](#) or [NCDHHS](#) to promote behaviors that prevent the spread of COVID-19.

It is recommended that places of worship:

- Make information available to workers, volunteers, congregants, and visitors about COVID-19 prevention and mitigation strategies, using methods like videos, webinars, or printed materials like FAQs. Some reliable sources include [NC DHHS COVID-19](#), [Know Your Ws: Wear, Wait, Wash](#), [NC DHHS COVID-19 Latest Updates](#), [NC DHHS COVID-19 Materials & Resources](#)
- Put up signs and posters, such as those found [Know Your Ws: Wear, Wait, Wash](#) and those found [Social Media Toolkit for COVID-19](#).
- If appropriate, have messaging such as a short video emphasizing the importance of maintaining physical distancing and hand hygiene.

Vaccine

Faith leaders, staff, volunteers, congregants should get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as one is available to them. Find your spot to take your shot and vaccine providers at NCDHHS's [Find Your Spot Website](#)

While most people are eager to get the vaccine, we still need to do more to earn the trust of others. Some people may need to understand that the vaccines are safe and effective. Others need to be confident that they and their communities are not being treated unjustly.

As a trusted voice in communities across the state, faith leaders can play an important role in sharing information about the vaccination and helping get North Carolinians back to the people and places we love.

It is strongly recommended that faith leaders:

- Share their story and encourage their networks to share why they got or plan to get the vaccine. We do not have the resources to record everyone, however, we've made it easy for others to support the effort. Use this [tip sheet](#) to record and share a video or photo.
- Become a vaccine 101 presenter. Participate in a training so that you be a voice in your community. Sign up for a training at [this link](#).
- Organize and host information meetings with network. Once you participate in the training, you can help educate others.
- Share videos and materials on social media, in your newsletters, and in your communities. Materials are available in [English](#) and in [Spanish](#). Videos are also available at [this link](#).
- Partner with your Local Health Department or other local vaccine provider to host a vaccine clinic at your church or in your community.

Survey for organizations wanting to host/support vaccine events:

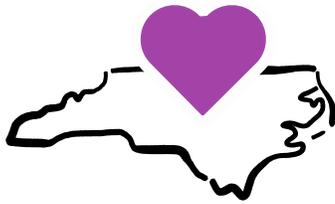
<https://forms.gle/yT55UVrP6DXZAic57>

☐ Toolkit for partner organizations wanting to support vaccination efforts:

<https://files.nc.gov/covid/documents/guidance/vaccinations/NCDHHS-Toolkit-for-Partner-Organizations-COVID-19-Vaccines.pdf>

Additional Resources

- CDC: [FAQs for Administrators and Leaders at Community- and Faith-Based Organizations](#)
- CDC: [Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community- and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019](#)
- CDC: [Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers](#)
- CDC: [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#)
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): [Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2](#)
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA): [Food Safety and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA): [Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19](#)
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security: [Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce](#)
- CDC's Guidance for Reopening Buildings After Prolonged Shutdown



#StayStrongNC

**Staying apart brings us together.
Protect your family and neighbors.**

Learn more at nc.gov/covid19.



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