

Worship Guideline: Christmas (and other major religious holiday)
West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod
25 October 2020 (rev. 23 November 2020)

As Christmas approaches, questions about Christmas Eve services in the midst of the pandemic have arisen (and have caused no small degree of anxiety). This guidance is provided to assist congregational leaders think through the issues with the following in mind:

- New information related to the pandemic is published on an ongoing basis as the research and medical communities learn more about COVID-19;
- Recommendations for risk mitigation change as both knowledge about COVID-19 increases and the levels of infection rise and fall in different localities;
- Local leadership is responsible for local decision making as a matter of ELCA polity and practicality; and
- Synodical guidance can provide general parameters, but local conditions should factor prominently in determining local response.

The Virus Doesn't Care Even If We Do

As far as the virus is concerned, Christmas is no different than any other day. The virus cares nothing about your religion, first amendment rights, or sentimental traditions. It is unthinking and unsympathetic. Much of our anxiety surrounding Christmas, therefore, is not actually over the virus; it is over our traditions. If we think about this as Lutherans, we would admit that most of our traditions surrounding Christmas are *adiaphora*, *i.e.*, nonessentials in that God does not command them, and they do not contribute to our salvation. Were we deprived of trees, brass choirs, poinsettias, and even the candlelight singing of Silent Night, Christ would still be the Son of God, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and the incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity would still be a fact. Indeed, the Holy Spirit would still be free to work faith in those who hear the Gospel even if that Gospel were whispered through a mask, unaccompanied by a single ornament. This Christmas may not be like other Christmases. Some of our practices may be eliminated, limited, or performed in different ways, but most of the Christmas practices most affected by pandemical constraints have never been the essentials of the faith. They have been good and pleasant adornment but not the true adornment of the church. In the midst of our anxieties, we should remember the teaching of our Confessions:

The true adornment of the churches is godly, useful, and clear doctrine, the devout use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and similar adornments are appropriate, but they are not the distinctive adornment of the Church.(*Apology* XXIV:51)

Separating what is truly essential from what merely appears to be essential is the key to reducing the anxiety that may accompany Christmas planning this year. What is more: we might just discover what really matters.

Safety & Hygiene

As previously stated, Christmas is no different than any other day as far as the virus is concerned. The safety and hygiene protocols used for any other worship service still apply. What is your congregation doing with respect to

- a. hygiene,
- b. screening,
- c. contact tracing,
- d. distancing,
- e. masks,
- f. length of service,
- g. singing,
- h. exchange of the peace,
- i. distribution of Communion,
- j. taking up of offering, and
- k. max capacity?

Review the current synod recommendations for in-person worship services, and then look at them again every few weeks to see if there have been changes resulting from new information or changing circumstances. Frequently check for the latest standards established by your local health department and other government agencies. These may change up to the day of any planned service.

Virtual Communion

So-called “virtual communion” is not acceptable. Yes, there are places where this is happening. Pastors who offer this abomination lie to their congregants when they proffer as the Sacrament that which is not the Sacrament. The formal cause of the sacrament cannot be sustained and, too often, the material cause is invalid. “Virtual communion,” simply put, is not the True Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. If it is any “communion” at all, it is a purely Zwinglian communion at best.

Opting Not To Worship In-Person

Congregational leadership may always opt to cancel in-person worship for Christmas. Whether this is the best course of action depends on multiple factors.

- Does your congregation have a good risk mitigation plan?
- Are your attendees willing to follow that risk mitigation plan?
- What is the viral load in your community?
- What is the viral exposure from outside your community?

It is possible that the answer to any one of these questions might be sufficient to justify suspending worship during the holidays. An individual congregation’s response is a matter of both its risk mitigation and its risk tolerance.

Indoor worship: The Capacity Challenge

The biggest challenge related to indoor worship will be capacity. Your COVID-19 estimated max capacity with distancing does not change because it is a holiday. Attendance, however, is likely to be higher at Christmas Eve than any other worship service. Consider the following options.

- A. You may want to consider multiple services.
 - 1. Multiple services on the same day/night are not recommended unless
 - a. you have sufficient time between services to
 - (1) ventilate space and
 - (2) appropriately disinfect surfaces.
 - b. With respect to hymnals:
 - (1) one can opt not to use hymnals, using
 - (a) fresh bulletins or
 - (b) projection; or
 - (2) one may use an alternating pew approach where one service uses the “even” pews and the subsequent service uses the “odd” pews.
 - 2. You can hold multiple Christmas services over the course of the Twelve Days (Dodekaameron)
 - a. Yes, Christmas is 12 days long, and each of those days counts as Christmas for church purposes.
 - (1) The Twelve Days begin with sundown (not before) on Christmas Eve (December 24) and run through Twelfth Night (the evening of January 5), according to ecclesiastical calendrics.
 - (2) If a service is held before sundown on December 24, it should be observed as the Feast of Adam and Eve (ask the bishop for details) and not as the Nativity of our Lord.
 - (3) There are some special feast days, lesser festivals, and commemorations scattered throughout the Twelve Days, providing some really cool opportunities to connect more profoundly with the story of Christ and his church (ask the bishop for details).
 - b. If holding multiple services across the course of the Twelve Days, it is best to
 - (1) hold service every other day or,
 - (2) if back-to-back days,
 - (a) disinfect between days or
 - (b) use “odd/even” pew alternation.
 - c. This bishop is willing to visit churches throughout the Twelve Days in order to assist with multiple services.
 - (1) Churches without ready access to supply pastors are first priority;
 - (2) Multiple-point parishes are second priority.
 - (3) During the Twelve Days, vacation coverage and non-Eucharistic services will be of lowest priority, and the bishop will not
 - (a) cover vacations during the Twelve Days so long as there are congregations with insufficient pastoral coverage or

- (b) supply non-Eucharistic services so long as there are congregations desirous of the Sacrament.
- B. You may have to limit attendance.
 - 1. You can simply cap entry once capacity is reached, locking any overflow out, without warning people in advance. This is not recommended for obvious reasons.
 - 2. You can “ticket” services—many large Roman Catholic (and even some really large Lutheran congregations) have done this for years.
 - a. Methods for ticketing vary.
 - (1) Each method requires
 - (a) the number of people in the party and
 - (b) a seating chart.
 - (2) Methods:
 - (a) First come-first served: Your office maintains a sign up sheet; people send in their reservation request; when the sign up sheet is full, everyone else is told, “Sorry, there is no room in the inn.”
 - (b) Lottery:
 - i) When there is one service, the names of those who have indicated that they want to attend are thrown in a hat; the names are drawn from the hat; once the seating chart is filled, everyone else is told, “Sorry, there is no room in the inn.”
 - ii) If there are multiple services,
 - a) a person may submit a request for one service and risk not getting in if it fills up or
 - b) accept assignment to any service at random
 - (c) Lottery with ranked preferences: the person requiring a ticket ranks the service that the party desires to attend from most to least desired; all the names go in a hat; as a name is drawn, it is given its highest ranking choice if there is still room; if not, the party gets its second choice.
 - b. To make this work:
 - (1) Notice that only those on the party ticket will be admitted.
 - (2) Requirement that people sit in the assigned seat because this will optimize attendance.
 - c. Will you leave a couple of extra seats for non-members who may show up? This is an evangelism/outreach question.

For indoor worship, safety

As mentioned previously, safety standards do not relax just because it is a holiday.

- A. Maintain social distancing in line with CDC, state, and local guidance.
- B. Follow mask recommendations in line with CDC and local health department.
- C. Follow all other capacity limits set by local health department.
- D. Follow guidelines on limiting the length of potential exposure (see Synod guidelines for

worship)

- E. Follow CDC guideline warning against singing indoors (corporate and choir singing indoors should not be allowed).
- F. The physical exchange of the peace should not be done, though the verbal exchange that is part of the liturgy remains.
- G. Eucharistic administration should follow good hygiene protocols.
- H. Screening and contact tracing should be continued.

Congregations should impress upon their members prior to the service what safety standards are in place. If your council sets a standard, that standard is binding upon those who wish to attend. The church is not a public accommodation. It is a private voluntary association. As such, it may set standards and enforce them. A congregation is under no obligation to allow access to any person who refuses to follow the rules established by its council.

Outdoor Worship

Outdoor worship may be an option. Some congregations are already making plans for services in parking lots, groves, etc.. One or more services might be held outdoors, following appropriate safety protocols for outdoor gatherings.

Web Resources

The CDC maintains useful resources. Links to these resources may be found on the Synod's COVID-19 web page, but we provide them here as well.

- CDC: Toolkit for Community and Faith-Based Organizations:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html>
- CDC: Event Planning and COVID-19: Questions and Answers (Information for Event Planners and Individuals):
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/event-planners-and-attendees-faq.html>
- CDC: Holiday Celebrations and Small Gatherings:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html>