

COVID-19: Worship and Religious Gathering Recommendations

The following are prevention recommendations issued by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and/or the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) - as well as best practices or required policies and procedures issued by U.S. religious bodies for worship or religious gatherings in an attempt to stem the spread of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) and protect the elderly and medically vulnerable. We recommend only CDC and DOHMH protocols. However, if your judicatory mandates you, or these additional precautions make your congregants/staff feel safer, consider some of the measures below.

Caution: COVID-19 information on social media and even from some elected leaders or news outlets is not based on medical facts - stick to the science and public health messaging. Additionally, Congregations can help prevent the stigmatization or targeting of groups of people by proactively sharing the messages found in this document. This outbreak is no excuse to spread racism and discrimination. Congregations should encourage their personnel and congregants to stay informed, remain vigilant, and take care of each other.

GATHERING TO WORSHIP

Science and our creator-given reason demand that we employ every means available to protect ourselves and the vulnerable against the spread of COVID-19 and all public health hazards, least our houses of worship become points of transmission. At this time, discontinuation of public gatherings is not recommended. However, health officials are advising that the elderly and those with chronic lung disease, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, or a weakened immune system should avoid unnecessary events and gatherings. Additionally, those who feel ill or sick should not attend worship/gatherings to avoid exposing people to their illness.

As of Friday, March 13 at 5pm, gatherings with 500 people or more will not be permitted in New York State. Further, for facilities with an occupancy of 500 or fewer, must reduce the legal capacity by 50%.

- 1) Post signs at all entrances and communicate that people feeling ill should not attend worship/gatherings. When possible, they may participate by internet or livestream - develop the capability if it doesn't exist and post URLs.
- 2) All houses of worship should provide hand sanitizing stations in their entry or sanctuary.
- 3) Christians should suspend the use of holy water stations.
- 4) Religious leaders and the faithful should refrain from hand shaking, touching, embracing, or reverencing the hands/rings of clergy or other ritual objects. Fist bump, elbow bump, wave, or simply bow. Liturgical greetings should be replaced by a reverent bow.
- 5) Congregant families may sit together, but distancing of several feet between worshippers should be considered in an enclosed space.
- 6) It is not recommended, but some congregations have removed shared books and encouraged congregants to bring their own. Or replicate all songs and prayers into single-use photocopied bulletins.
- 7) Christian congregations who celebrate holy communion from a common cup (chalice) should refrain from self-intinction (dipping). Consider distributing a dipped host/bread into their palm.
- 8) Guidelines, that can be used for disinfecting worship spaces and ritual objects are provided in "Other Resources" on the next page.
- 9) Post-liturgy greeting lines should be moved outside or suspended.



If your congregation has not done so already, equip your worship space with livestream or webcam capability to allow the ill, elderly, or vulnerable to participate - especially for those feeling isolated in medical or self-quarantine.

Pastoral visits too can be conducted virtually via laptops, desktops, and cell phone. Or, at a congregants home by asking them to come outside and take a walk, weather permitting, for private conversations.

SHARE PERSONAL PROTECTION MEASURES WITH CONGREGANTS & STAFF

Remind congregants, including children, to wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Need a timer? Sing the "Happy Birthday" song from beginning to end twice.

- Place prominent signs directing people to the restrooms or handwashing stations.
- Make sure restrooms are well-stocked with soap and paper towels.
- If possible, place hand sanitizer bottles in the sanctuary, classrooms, and nurseries.

Remind congregants, including children, to cover their sneezes and coughs with their elbow or a tissue. Remind congregants, including children, not to touch their face with unwashed hands.

Advise congregants and staff to write or review their family emergency plans and practice them.

ALTERNATIVE STAFF COMMUTING AND REMOTE WORK RECOMMENDED

To reduce overcrowding, the City is advising private-sector employers and employees to consider telecommuting where possible and to consider staggered start times for workers. Those who take the subways at rush hour should consider commuting to work via alternative modes of transportation, like biking or walking, if possible.

If you begin to feel sick, stay home and call your medical provider. If you do not have a medical provider, or it is after hours and you develop [symptoms of COVID-19](#) and were in close contact with a person who spent time in an area known to have widespread community spread of COVID-19, please stay home and call 311 to be connected to a provider.

TRUSTED PUBLIC HEALTH INFORMATION SOURCES:

Remind your congregants and networks that **rumor control** and regular situational awareness are essential. Please get your information from trusted public health sources like:

- **CDC Coronavirus Page:** <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
- **NYC DOHMH:** <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/coronavirus.page>
- **NYC DOHMH:** Download and share COVID-19 [fact sheet](#) or follow [@nycHealthy](#) on Twitter

TRUSTED FAITH SECTOR INFORMATION SOURCES:

- **Social Media:** The fastest source for updates is on NYDIS' [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).
- **Website:** Check out NYDIS' [COVID-19 page](#) for updates and other faith-based resources.

Sign-Up: NYC HOWalert (NYC House of Worship Alert) system

HOWalert is a free emergency notification system for religious leaders and communications "decision makers" from NYC congregations, religious bodies/networks and nonprofits. It will notify subscribers about life-threatening incidents or other hazards that may affect faith sector facilities. It also notifies subscribers with information that should be urgently shared with their congregants, clients, or staff. Communication can be two-way – by sending messages with live links to surveys that collect emerging needs or allowing religious leaders to request help during an unfolding public health emergency or disaster. Register at www.howalert.org/signup.



OTHER RESOURCES

- NYDIS' Pandemic Workshops for Congregations: <https://www.nydisnet.eventbrite.com>
- CDC COVID-19 Information Page: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index/html>
- NYC DOHMH COVID-19 Information Page: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health-topics/coronavirus.page>
- CDC COVID-19 Guidance for Faith-Based Organizations: <https://bit.ly/39pHuJX>
- NYC DOHMH Interim Guidelines for Congregate Settings: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/guidance-for-congregate-settings-covid19.pdf>
- NYC DOHMH General Disinfection Guidelines: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/disinfection-guidance-for-businesses-covid19.pdf>
- CDC Faith-Based and Community Organizations Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Checklist: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/pdf/faithbasedcommunitychecklist.pdf>