

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church - Detailed Re-Gathering Plan

Approved by Church Council August 13, 2020

Theological Foundations for Worship in the Time of Pandemic:

As People of God, called together into one body, we affirm these truths:

- Our first calling is to love God and our neighbor. We express our love of God through our commitment to God's calling and trust in God's provision. In the context of a deadly pandemic, we express our love of neighbor by taking all necessary steps to protect our neighbors from harm.
- The church is the people. While we long to gather together for our worship, the life and ministry of the church is not defined or limited by this gathering. Whether we are gathering in-person, or sharing ministry remotely, the work of the church is our first concern, not the decision about whether to worship in-person.
- God has given us the gift of creativity. As our worship adjusts to protect the health of our community and our neighbors, we will celebrate new ways to connect with God and each other.
- Our worship is about honoring God, not satisfying our own preferences. While we are blessed through our worship, that blessing can sometimes be found in the way worship draws us out of consumer habits that center on our own desires. We affirm that it is God's Spirit, working in and through us, that both transforms us and meets our deepest longings.

Community Covenant

As we move through this time of adjustment and decision-making as a church community, we are both challenged and invited to be the church that we long for. Both the mind-set and the behaviors of all individual members of the church community will help to determine how our congregation survives and thrives in this time of change. As we share the work of witnessing to God's work in the world together, we ask our community members to commit to these goals:

- To seek to abide by the letter and spirit of all guidelines and decisions, rather than seeking ways around them;
- To ask questions when we don't understand, and to confirm information before sharing it;
- To make space for mourning the experiences and opportunities lost due to the pandemic with compassion, and to share this sadness in ways that build up our community;
- To make all feel welcome by respecting others' need for safety measures, even if they seem unnecessary to us;
- To look for new opportunities and learning that we might have otherwise missed and that we can celebrate.

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Timing & Scheduling

Two primary factors will determine when we begin gathering for in-person worship, and whether we are able to continue to gather on an on-going basis.

1. Safety. The State of New Jersey is currently limiting indoor gatherings to 25 people, or 25% of building capacity (whichever is less). This is one benchmark of safety. Being located in north-west Morris County (near both Sussex and Warren) we can also track more local exposure levels to determine the risk associated with multi-household gatherings. The church Council will continue to follow state guidance and local data to guide decisions about gathering. Factors that can cause us to suspend in-person gathering plans will include:
 - Statewide restrictions prohibiting indoor gatherings to less than 25 people; and/or
 - Sustained increase in cases at the tri-county level.
 - i. We will use data for # of new cases in the last 7-days for Morris, Sussex, and Warren counties, compiled by NJ Spotlight - <https://www.njspotlight.com/2020/03/tracking-cases-of-covid-19-county-by-county-in-new-jersey/>.
 - ii. Data will be checked each Thursday, and charted to track changes over time.
 - iii. If the total number of new cases among the three counties, or in Morris County alone, increases week over week for two (2) consecutive weeks, by 5% or more, Council will discuss suspending in-person worship. [If there is strong evidence to indicate that the spike is connected to a particular town or region of a county that is far removed from the church and our worshippers, that would be taken into account in the decision.]
 - iv. If in-person worship is suspended, it will remain suspended until the # of new cases has fallen for two consecutive weeks.
 - v. If the # of new cases increases week over week for 2 weeks by 5% or more in either Sussex or Warren Counties, Council will determine whether worshippers who live or work in the impacted county will be asked to refrain from gathering for worship until the relevant case numbers fall.
 - vi. Worshippers will be advised by Thursday night of the plans for worship, based on case numbers.
2. Technical capacity. Several volunteers, along with Pastor Serena, have been working hard to develop detailed plans, make decisions, and research, purchase, and install the necessary equipment to hold in-person worship that is safe for all in attendance and still accessible for those worshipping from home. All of these pieces must be in place before we can begin in person worship, and the availability of specialized equipment is one

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delaying factor. In-person worship will be an option once we have all materials and plans for safe gathering and for live-streaming the worship.

- We hope to have all purchases and installation completed by the end of August. Once installed, this equipment will allow us to live-stream our worship into the foreseeable future. We have received a \$3,500 grant from the NJ Synod to defray these costs.

When we gather, the number of worshippers in the building at one time will be limited to 25% of the sanctuary capacity (24 people, including all worship leaders – with the exception of the soloist, who will be located in the kitchen). In order to allow all who wish to gather the opportunity to do so, we will be holding two worship services, separated in start time by 2 hours to allow adequate time for cleaning and refreshing the air in the sanctuary. Attendance will be moderated through a system of on-line reservations, to assure that we do not exceed capacity limits at either service.

- The reservation system will ask worshippers to identify the number of people in their household who will attend, so that chairs can be grouped appropriately.
- The system will confirm the reservation, once made, so that people are clear on when they have reserved a worship spot.
- The system will send a reminder e-mail about the safety precautions to be observed to all reserved worshippers.
- We will reserve two (2) spots at each service for new guests.
- After the first month of in-person worship, all worshippers who were not able to reserve a spot at the 10:00am worship service will have advance opportunity to reserve a 10:00am spot at the next month's in-person worship. This will be provided by sending a link to the reservation program to all on our contact list who did NOT get a 10:00am reservation for the prior month one day (24 hours) before the reservation program is opened up to the full e-mail list.

Worship Format

Our planning seeks to preserve as much of the familiar structure of our worship liturgy as is possible, while adjusting for safety and for the new opportunities for creativity in this time. Our initial worship plan will follow the Gather, Word, Meal, Sending structure of the ELW liturgy, with adjustments as indicated below:

- **Hybrid worship plan.** Based on the feedback from the survey, and considering the needs of both those wanting to gather and those unable to do so, we will gather once per month in-person with a shortened liturgy, and the other Sundays of the month we will continue with our fuller liturgy exclusively by live-stream.
- **Shortened service.** The length of time spent in an enclosed space with a virus carrier is a primary risk factor for contracting the virus. Therefore, we will be shortening the

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worship service as much as possible to seek to keep time in the building with a large group under 45 minutes.

The worship will include the welcome, prayer of confession and forgiveness, greeting, prayer of the day, two readings, short sermon, hymn of the day, creed, prayers of the church, peace, words of institution, Lord's Prayer, communion (with solo hymn), blessing, and dismissal.

Announcements will be printed in the bulletin, but not highlighted in the service.

- ***Meditative entry.*** In preparation for worship, people will be invited to immediately enter the sanctuary on arrival and find a seat in silence. Prelude music will be played to aid as we prepare our hearts, and for those gathering via the livestream (please be aware that the microphone in the sanctuary will be "live" online). This will be a time for quiet prayer and reflection, with resources provided in the bulletin.
- ***Solo singing / instrumental music:*** Music will be a part of the service, but the congregation will not be singing. We will have one soloist for sung elements of the liturgy, such as the Hymn of the Day, Communion Hymn, and limited liturgical musical. The congregation may mouth words silently, if desired, or silently meditate on the music. In addition, instrumental music (piano/organ) will be played for the prelude and postlude to aid in private meditation and prayer.

The singer will be safely separated from the congregation, worshipping from the doorway into the kitchen, which will be covered by a sealed, plastic barrier. The singer will be able to see and be seen by the congregation, and will be audible through a microphone, but the singer will not enter the worshipping space during the service, so as to keep their air space separate from the congregation.

- ***Communion practice:*** Communion is a deeply important part of worship for our community, and so we are seeking to provide a safe way to partake. Communion elements will be prepared before the service by a member of altar guild, who will be masked and wear disposable gloves at all times. Bread will be broken into individual portions and wine/juice will be poured into single-serve plastic cups. Single servings will be placed onto individual plates. We will provide options of bread/wine; bread/juice; and egg-free crackers/wine. The prepared elements will then be covered by a cloth resting on a frame that can be removed as one piece.

During communion, the pastor will remove the cover from the elements, which will be on a table at the front of the altar area. The pastor will then move to the top of the altar to lead the prayers and speak the words of institution from the altar. Individual family groups will be called forward to receive, keeping their masks in place. Each person should clean their hands with hand sanitizer, and then take one plate, taking from the outer ring to avoid touching any other elements. The pastor will announce "the body of

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Christ broken for you; the blood of Christ shed for you.” The person or family will then return to their seat. Only once they are back at their seat may they temporarily remove their masks to consume the elements, and then immediately replace their masks.

If a worshipper is not able to come forward to the altar, due to mobility issues, a household member may collect their communion plate for them, or the dancer may deliver a plate to their seat.

If anyone does not wish to receive communion, they may remain at their seat, and the pastor may offer a blessing.

- **No indoor fellowship time.** The service will not provide a context for extended social interaction, given the need to restrict time in the building. Other congregational teams are working to provide alternative opportunities for social interaction, both in-person in small groups, and through electronic tools.
- **Embodied Prayer.** We will be exploring various options for non-vocal congregational participation in the worship. Such options will include hand motions expressing the Lord’s prayer, responsive motions for affirmation of the Prayers of the Church, simple acts such as crossing oneself, or raising hands in affirmation, and potential clapping rhythms for participation in musical elements of the liturgy. All present will be encouraged to join in various embodied prayer and praise motions, as they are comfortable.
- **Live-streaming.** In order to remain inclusive of all members of our community, the 10:00am in-person worship service will be live-streamed every time we gather. Participation in this worship service implies consent to have one’s recorded image included in the livestream video. The audio from the live worship will be used throughout the livestream service, although some visual elements (such as slides for songs) may be used for the remote worshippers.

Safety Protocols

In order to ensure that our gathering does not risk the health and safety of staff, members, or guests of the church, the following safety protocols will be consistently observed. All people who enter the building agree to abide by all protocols.

- **Mask-wearing:** All people entering and present in the building will be required to wear masks that cover their nose and mouth at all times (masks may be momentarily removed **only** for the time needed to partake in communion at your seat). All worship leaders will wear masks throughout the service, and at all times when in the building, with the exception of the soloist who will remain in the kitchen, separated from the sanctuary by a sealed plastic partition.

If a worshipper arrives without a face covering, one will be provided for their use.

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If either the usher or the presiding minister observes a mask being removed or shifted so that it no longer covers nose and mouth, they will request that it be replaced. If the person declines, the service will immediately be ended and all worshippers will exit.

- **Social-distancing:** Seats have been spaced to ensure minimum 6 feet distance between households. Worshippers will be required to sit only with members of their household “bubble” and to remain at their seats throughout the service, except when invited forward by household to receive communion.

Social distancing markers will be placed on the patio outside the building, so that households waiting outside for the building to open can remain easily distanced.

Upon entering the building, people will be asked to find seats in a grouping that matches the number of their household reservation. Worshippers will be discouraged from moving from their seat during the service.

If necessary, worshippers may exit into the Narthex, and later return, but they will be required to keep their masks on at all times in the building. If a worshipper begins to show any signs of illness (such as persistent coughing – beyond just clearing one’s throat) they will be expected to immediately exit the building and not return to the worship space.

At the conclusion of the worship, household groups will be asked to exit the building, maintaining distance between households.

- **Posted & written guidance:** CDC posters will be posted at all entrances to the building, all bathrooms, and at the entrance to the sanctuary. These posters will state the requirement to wear cloth face coverings and maintain 6 feet of distance, and will prohibit entry to anyone with a fever, cough, or shortness of breath.

A more detailed instructional sheet will be included in bulletins, which includes guidance on how to correctly wear and remove face coverings, and other safety measures.

- **Hand-sanitizing:** Hand sanitizer will be provided at the entry to the building and on the communion table. All worshippers will be asked to sanitize their hands upon entry, and prior to taking communion. All worship leaders will wash their hands prior to the worship service and will also use hand sanitizer prior to removing the cloth cover on the communion table.
- **Removal of all common-use items:** In order to reduce the risk of touch-transmission, all hymnals and Bibles will be removed from the sanctuary, and the full service will be printed in single-use worship bulletins, which will be placed on chairs prior to the service.

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The collection plate will not be passed during the service but will be placed on the welcome table in the Narthex where worshippers can leave their offering before or after worship.

The guest book and pens will be removed from the Narthex. If a guest joins for worship, the Usher will request permission to complete a new visitor card, or allow the guest to complete the new visitor card with their own pen.

- **Font.** Un-chlorinated water offers some risk of virus transmission, so the water of the font will not be available for worshippers to dip their fingers into. The font will be located up on the altar. However, we will provide small disposable cups on the altar rail containing a small amount of water, along with a paper towel or napkin. Those who wish, may take one of these cups, bless themselves with the water, and then place the paper towel or napkin into the cup to absorb the excess water. This cup should be taken with them and disposed of after the worship service.
- **Air-flow:** due to the dangers associated with consistent patterns of air flow, we will not run fans or other cooling systems while people are gathered in the sanctuary. Doors and windows will be opened to offer cross-ventilation and the exchange of fresh air. People may use paper fans to cool themselves. Those who are very sensitive to heat, will be encouraged to be conscious of the heat conditions when deciding whether to attend the worship in-person, rather than joining on-line.

Before and between services, fans will be run to cool the sanctuary as much as possible, and also to refresh the air in the building. We are also exploring options for an air filtration system.

- **Bathroom use:** Worshippers will be encouraged to use bathroom facilities at home prior to coming to worship, but the building's single-persons bathrooms will be open if needed. Multi-stall bathrooms will be closed due to the impossibility to preserving social distancing in the common areas of these bathrooms. The exception is that parents may use the changing table, and may also accompany small children to the bathroom.

The single-stall bathroom near the kitchen will be reserved for the soloist, and the door into the Narthex will be closed.

- **Cleaning protocols:** All high-touch surfaces will be cleaned with high-alcohol cleaning wipes before and after each building use (High-touch surfaces include door knobs, bars, and touchplates for entry and bathroom doors; toilet flushers; sinks; and backs of chairs). Worship leaders will share responsibility for these cleaning tasks between services.

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Worshippers will be asked to take all disposable items (bulletins, masks, gloves, etc.) home with them for disposal. A trash receptacle will be placed by the exit to the sanctuary to dispose of single-use communion ware.

Roles

This plan for in-person worship during the time of pandemic will require co-operation, commitment, and good-will from all involved, as well as a number of important leadership and assistance roles. We hope and trust that members of our community will be willing to step forward to share in the work of enabling meaningful worship that nourishes our community gathered together and separated at home.

- **Pastor.** The pastor is committed to being present at all in-person worship, barring illness or other emergency. In speech and in written communications, the pastor will articulate the theological foundations of our church's mission, including how these are expressed in our adjusted worship practices. If necessary, the pastor will offer reminders of safety protocols while leading worship, and will suspend worship if it becomes necessary to protect the health and safety of the community.
- **Assistant Minister.** Each time we gather for worship, we will need an assistant minister to assist with leading prayers, readings, and responses on behalf of the congregation. The Assistant Minister will be masked and will remain on the left side of the altar throughout the service. The Assistant Minister will use a microphone so that they can be easily heard without projecting their voice.
- **Musician.** The musician will provide pre-service music, all liturgical accompaniment, communion music, and postlude, assisting the congregation to settle our minds into this dedicated time of worship.
- **Soloist.** The soloist will remain in the kitchen area throughout the service, but will participate in the full worship service as a worshipper. They will sing the Hymn of the Day, Communion Hymn, and limited liturgical music. They will be unmasked, but separated by a plastic partition from the congregation. Both the soloist and musician will receive communion after the service.
- **Dancer.** A member of the dance ministry will assist with leading the congregation in the embodied motions of the Lord's Prayer to help the congregation experience their participation in this prayer as the pastor speaks the words, and will also lead responsive motions throughout the service. The dancer will sit in the front row and will come to the center front of the sanctuary in front of the altar at times of prayer. If needed, the dancer may also be asked to deliver a communion plate to any worshippers who are not able to come forward due to mobility issues.

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- **Usher.** The usher will open the church doors 10 minutes prior to the start of service, and will stand on the far side of the sanctuary doors in the Narthex. If necessary, the usher will remind entering people about the proper way to wear their masks, and will provide masks to anyone who does not have one. The usher will then direct people to find their seats, where the bulletin will be waiting. In the case of new visitors, the usher may invite them to complete a new visitor card.

During the service, the usher will sit at the back of the sanctuary and participate in the service. At the conclusion of the service, the usher will assist with managing the exit from the building to ensure proper distancing. The usher will also be responsible to count attendance and to track who is in attendance as needed for contact tracing.

- **Live-stream technician.** The live-stream technician will handle the logistical work of broadcasting the 10:00am service via FB live, using our OBS system. The technician will initiate the live feed and ensure that it is working properly, post the link to the church website, and switch the view to slides or images for any part of the remote service where the visual will not come from the live worship service. The technician will also work with the camera to ensure it is focused on the correct part of the altar at all times.
- **Joyful worshippers.** The most important role in the worship is shared by all who gather. We are all, first and foremost, worshippers. Whatever other responsibilities we have, and whatever frustrations or longings we bring to the service, we are there to worship our loving and gracious God. When we participate in a spirit of worship, that spirit uplifts and blesses our own hearts, those around us, and God whom we seek to honor. We can all practice gratitude for this opportunity to worship in our sacred space, and through our gratitude we will fill our worship with praise in spirit and in truth.

Invitation to Growth

The mission of Abiding Peace states that our congregation *makes Christ known by welcoming all people to a supportive and accepting place to grow in faith and community, and to serve the Lord as people created by God, saved by Christ, and nurtured by the Holy Spirit.* The guidance in this document includes many different restrictions and changes to our way of doing things that could feel like they are suppressing our growth. But they will stop us from growing only if we ignore their invitation. Any time we are asked to do things in a new way, we have a chance to grow – to grow our ability to learn, and to try, and discover God’s infinite capacity to meet us where we are.

May our collective worship, both in-person and remotely, be a seed that flourishes in good soil as we seek to grow not only in our own faith, but in the fruit we bear for the kingdom of God.

Additional Resource

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[If you wish to review the comprehensive resource that was our primary guide in developing these guidelines, it is available here: <https://www.spas-elca.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Resuming-Care-filled-Worship-and-Sacramental-Life.pdf>]