

Epiphany Lutheran Church, Centerville

Return to In-person Worship Letter & Plan

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace, peace and mercy be multiplied to you from God Our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Together with my fellow pastors, staff and council members, I wish you God's blessings and express my deepest thanks for your patience, prayers and support in these uncharted times. We are very thankful for the gifts of technology that have given us opportunities for worship and education, fellowship and care. While we have had some hiccups along the way, we learn as we go, thankful for God's forgiveness and grace (and yours too!).

The staff and church council officers have been meeting weekly, and the full church council has been meeting monthly to monitor our efforts and make plans for in-person worship, when that time comes. Yet the more we discuss it, the more we realize worship will not look or feel the same in many ways for quite some time. Together with colleagues from across the country, I have been in conversations and meetings about what we can and cannot do, what we should and should not do, and when it might be safe to step forward. We have listened to bishops, doctors, scientists, government and health officials and each other. We will continue to do so.

Before I go any further, I give you my word that these are my guiding principles:

1. The reason I am a pastor and the reason we exist as a church is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have continued to do this throughout these challenging days. That will not change.
2. The safety and well-being of the members and visitors and participants of worship and activities at Epiphany Lutheran Church facilities, and off-site activities associated with Epiphany Lutheran Church, will guide every decision we make.

In addition to these two items, we will consider legally-binding orders, recommendations from health officials, recommendations from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Southern Ohio Synod office, insurer loss-control recommendations and our insurance policy, and phased approaches to opening of businesses and community activities in our state and country.

It is also important to note that each congregation is different. As congregations around our community and across the country make plans to open, each congregation must take into consideration many factors, including amount of space, number of congregants, age and health of the congregation, worship practices and more.

To plan for worship in person again, we have established several phases, as well as many protocols to be followed so that worship is as safe as possible for all who attend.

I shared this information with church council last Thursday, and we unanimously agreed that we will continue to remain closed, and we will continue to monitor the situation to determine when it will be prudent and safe to open once again.

When that time comes, here are the protocols we are considering:

PROTOCOL FOR WORSHIP AT EPIPHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH

Congregants 65 and older and those with a compromised immune system or are considered to be in a high-risk group will be encouraged to watch the live stream from home. Also, those who are not yet comfortable being present in a group setting will be encouraged to join in our live streaming worship offerings.

1. Congregants will make reservations online. Reservations will be limited at each service.

2. Face coverings that cover the mouth and nose will be required for everyone age 2 and older. Congregants will be asked to bring their own mask. Masks will be available on site for those who come without. **No one will be permitted to attend worship without a face covering.**
3. Congregants will be requested to arrive early.
4. All doors will be propped open so congregants can avoid opening and closing doors.
5. All spaces will be clearly marked with a 6 ft radius of other family units/people.
6. All unnecessary items in worship spaces have been removed to avoid cross contamination, including hymnals, bibles, envelopes and pens.
7. A large receptacle will be available for congregants to place offering envelopes. All congregants will be encouraged to either give online or text to give.

During Worship

1. All staff and worship servers will wear a face covering that covers the nose and mouth. Staff and worship servers will be instructed to avoid touching their face and instructed on proper hand washing techniques.
2. X's will be placed on the ground both inside and outside to mark locations for maintaining a safe physical distance. Ushers and greeters will encourage congregants to abide by the six-foot physical distance.
3. A worship server will be available in the parking lot to direct congregants upon arrival and at dismissal.
4. Congregants will be checked in by door greeters, who will check temperature and well-being of those attending.
5. Seating arrangements, benches and pews will be clearly labeled so ushers can direct congregants to a specific area.
6. Congregants will be asked to limit bathroom use. Bathrooms will be limited to one family at a time.
7. High touch surfaces will be cleaned before, during and after all worship services. Surfaces will be cleaned with a CDC-registered disinfectant.
8. Pastors will come to the congregants to serve communion.
9. Congregants will be dismissed one family group/person at a time and will be encouraged to practice physical distancing of six feet.
10. Because of the nature of the virus, congregational singing and liturgical responses will not be included in worship at this time.
11. Congregants will be encouraged to exit immediately upon being dismissed.
12. Meetings in the building or parking lot will not be permitted.
13. NO COFFEE OR DONUTS!

Post Worship

1. Worship spaces will remain untouched for three days, and until all hard surfaces are cleaned with a CDC-registered disinfectant. All soft surfaces will be sprayed with a CDC-registered disinfectant and bathrooms will be cleaned and disinfected with a CDC-registered disinfectant.
2. The gathering spaces will be cleaned by wiping down all hard surfaces with a CDC-registered disinfectant and all soft surfaces will be sprayed with a CDC-registered disinfectant. Special attention will be given to high-touch surfaces.
3. Trash will be removed from worship and gathering spaces by staff or worship servers. Staff and worship servers will be instructed to wear gloves while handling any trash and to follow the proper hand washing technique after discarding the waste.

PHASED RETURN FOR WORSHIP

As of today, Epiphany Lutheran Church remains closed. That includes all worship and other activities in and outside our buildings, including the soccer and baseball fields and volleyball court at the Austin Campus.

Our first step to returning will be worship, and that will happen in phases. Each phase will take into consideration the exhaustive list stated above, as well as a review of the processes in the current phase before we proceed.

Each phase will be an addition to the one before.

ALL phases up to the complete reopening will follow the protocol listed above.

Guidelines for activities and programs outside of worship will come at a later date.

Phase 1

Live streaming worship
Zoom education and fellowship activities
Limited staff office time
Building cleaning and maintenance

Phase 2

Outdoor Chapel worship
Limited seating in pavilion
Lawn seating (tailgate tents will be welcomed)
Short-range radio broadcast for those who wish to stay in their cars

Phase 3

Worship in the Far Hills Celebration Center

Phase 4

Worship in the Far Hills Sanctuary

Phase 5

Worship at the Austin Campus

Phase 6

Back to normal?

This is what we know. What we don't know yet is when. We don't know what the worship times will be. We don't know how many people will be allowed to be in each worship space.

Finally, please note that this is new territory for all of us. Because of that, things change rapidly. The more we know, the better the decisions we can make.

We ask for your patience and grace as we continue to move forward.

As always, I welcome your comments and questions.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission and ministry together.

Peace,

Pastor Charlie