

LETTER FROM SESSION

Guide to Church Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Church life at St. James has taken on quite a different look since COVID-19 took hold in our city. Though we know there is no perfect substitute for gathering together in person, we hope you are taking part in our gatherings online—whether that’s worshipping via Zoom, our website or on Facebook, participating in our virtual coffee hour after service on Sundays or visiting with church friends by phone, email or online.

Following its meeting on May 10, Session appointed a church reopening task force to create guidelines and procedures that will allow us to resume in-person church activities in a safe manner as we move through Washington State’s phased reopening plan. In developing this guidance, the task force studied what is currently known on the mechanics of virus transmission and drew from two main sources:

- [Healthy Washington - Roadmap to Recovery](#) by Washington State
- [Recommendations on Reopening Congregations](#) by the Northwest Coast Presbytery

Session approved these guidelines and procedures on July 12, 2020, and the task force updated them on January 14, 2021, in accordance with new state guidelines. The guidance document is now based on Washington’s two-phased approach to reopening and will guide all church activities through this pandemic. The task force will remain in place throughout all phases of reopening, and church guidelines and procedures will be updated as state, local and presbytery recommendations and guidance continue to evolve.

Please know that these guidelines and procedures have been developed with attention to our specific circumstances and demographics at St. James. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to reopening. Session must do what it feels is right to protect the people of St. James. The decisions we make can mean the difference between life and death, and Session believes it’s best to err on the side of caution.

A few notes: As we move into a new phase, it may take time to ramp up our operations since there is volunteer training involved. We ask that you please be patient. We are trying to open our building in the safest manner possible. It is possible that based on virus activity and metrics defined by the state, Whatcom County could be moved back into a prior phase with more restrictions.

Even after vaccines are widely available and in use, no guideline or procedure is 100% foolproof in keeping you healthy. Every member of this community will need to make the decision on when it’s best to come back to St. James. Until vaccinated, those at higher risk of complications from COVID-19 are encouraged to worship from home. (See Guidance on Persons at Higher Risk of COVID-19 Complications.)

All those over 2 years old who come through our doors will be required to wear a mask and adhere to social distancing guidelines while in the church building. If you cannot wear a mask or prefer not to wear a mask, we ask that you worship from home. This decision—as well as our other guidelines and procedures—are to protect the people of this community.

Thank you.

Session of St. James Presbyterian Church

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated January 14, 2021

How can I worship if I cannot be there in person?

St. James will continue to livestream Sunday morning worship throughout all phases of reopening—and even beyond reopening! You can access online worship through our website at www.saintjamespres.org/live, the St. James Facebook page at www.facebook.com/saintjamespres or via Zoom. (Zoom instructions can be found in your weekly church announcements email, pastor's note and in the Pulse newsletter.)

I would like to worship in person at St. James. When can I do that, and what do I need to do to protect myself and the church community?

Starting in Phase 1, at the discretion of the Session, St. James may hold Sunday worship in the sanctuary, with a limited number of people. If you would like to worship with us in person, please understand that the entrance door will be closed once we have reached our maximum building and/or room capacity.

To worship with us in person, we ask that you abide by the following guidelines to keep our community safe. These guidelines will be in place throughout all phases of reopening—until a vaccine is widely available and widely in use.

- Though not a requirement, those at higher risk of complications from COVID-19 are encouraged to worship from home. (See “Who is at higher risk of complications from COVID-19?” below.)
- Stay home if you have experienced symptoms within the last 48 hours or if you suspect you may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19. Symptoms include cough, fever, chills, muscle pain, shortness of breath/difficulty breathing, sore throat or a new loss of taste or smell.
- Enter through the office door, and take your temperature using the wall-mounted, no-touch thermometer at the entrance.
- All persons (ages 2 and up) must wear a mask at all times while inside the church building, including in the restroom. This is a mandate. If you cannot wear a mask, then we ask that you worship with us online.

- All persons must maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone who is not from their own household.
- Upon entering the sanctuary or balcony, sit in a pew that is not roped off.
- Since social distancing is difficult between children, we ask that parents keep children in the pew during the worship service. To protect your children and our childcare staff and volunteers, we will not be able to offer nursery services or Godly Play on Sundays. For the children's message during service, children will participate from the pew (not gathered in the front of the sanctuary as before).
- Because singing exponentially increases aerosol spread (even when a mask is worn by a singer), we ask that you do not sing or hum while inside the church building to protect others. This guideline is a requirement from the Presbytery of the Northwest Coast.
- After the service, please exit through the narthex doors.
- If you would like to participate in outdoor fellowship, please continue to wear your mask and maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone who is not from your own household. Also, please note, while masks are a requirement, we will not be able to serve food or drinks.

I am a worship leader and/or participate in worship activities at St. James. What do I need to do to help keep people safe when we return to in-person worship?

The following guidelines and procedures apply to anyone serving in a leadership capacity on Sundays (pastor, ushers, lectors, music leaders, fellowship hosts, etc.). Session will schedule a training session and/or provide a training video for these leaders before Sunday worship returns to the sanctuary.

- Starting in Phase 1, at the discretion of the Session, St. James may hold Sunday worship in the sanctuary with a limited number of people.
- Though not a requirement, those at higher risk of complications from COVID-19 are encouraged to worship from home. (See "Who is at higher risk of complications from COVID-19?" below.)
- Stay home if you have experienced symptoms within the last 48 hours or if you suspect you may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19. Symptoms include cough, fever, chills, muscle pain, shortness of breath/difficulty breathing, sore throat or a new loss of taste or smell.
- Enter through the office door, and take your temperature using the wall-mounted, no-touch thermometer at the entrance.
- All persons (ages 2 and up) must wear a mask at all times while inside the church building, including in the restroom. This is a mandate. Anyone who cannot wear a mask should be asked to worship from home.
- All persons must maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone who is not from their own household.
- In preparing for service, please ensure that all doors are locked except for the office door. At the end of service, open the narthex doors which will serve as an exit.
- Open all doors to the sanctuary to minimize touchpoints.

- Position volunteer(s) outside of the office entrance near a table which should include a collection of masks, hand sanitizer and printed bulletins (for those who are not following the service via a smartphone app).
- Once the maximum allowable number of people have entered the building, the office door should be closed and locked. An outside sign or sign on the door will express the church's apologies and policy.
- Hymnals, Bibles, pew pads and other material should be removed from the pews. We will not offer name tags during this time.
- Liturgy will be structured to minimize congregational responses, and we will employ alternative ways of passing the peace to maintain social distancing guidelines.
- While masks remain a requirement, we will not be serving the Lord's Supper.
- Since social distancing is difficult between children, we are asking that parents keep children in the pew during the worship service. To protect children and childcare staff and volunteers, we will not be offering nursery services and Godly Play on Sundays. For the children's message during service, children will participate from the pew (not gathered in the front of the sanctuary).
- Because singing and breath-based instruments both exponentially increase aerosol spread (even when a mask is worn by a singer), there will be no choir activities, congregational singing or the use of wind instruments. This guideline is a requirement from the Presbytery of the Northwest Coast. Instead, employ string instruments and handbells (if participants are properly distanced).
- Online giving will be encouraged, however, also place a basket at the back of the sanctuary for those wanting to give in person. Those handling the offering after service must wear gloves.
- Ensure outside narthex doors are open at the end of service so congregants can easily exit the church building.
- Starting in Phase 1, fellowship may only be held outdoors. All participants must wear masks and maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone who is not from their own household. No food or drink may be served.

Will there be fellowship before or after church?

Although we will not be able to serve food or drinks while masks are a requirement, we hope you will join us for outdoor fellowship after worship service! (If you are a fellowship host, see FAQ guidance for worship leaders above.) We ask that you continue to wear your mask and maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from those who are not from your household.

When can Sunday Bible Study meet?

Out of consideration for those who are at higher risk of complications from COVID-19 (see "Who is at higher risk of complications from COVID-19?" below), we are asking adult education leaders to hold classes online for now. That way we're not leaving anyone out or putting undue pressure on those who may not feel comfortable coming back to church just yet. We hope you will join us online!

When will Godly Play and nursery services resume?

Once social distancing guidelines are relaxed and masks are no longer a church requirement, we will resume Godly Play and begin offering nursery services again. Until that time, we ask that parents keep children in the pew during the worship service. Since social distancing is difficult between young children, we feel this is the best course of action to protect children and our childcare staff and volunteers.

I serve as a deacon. What can I do to protect people during this time?

To protect those who are at higher risk of complications from COVID-19 (see “Who is at higher risk of complications from COVID-19?” below), we are asking that deacons continue to call, email/write and/or hold online meetings with those needing pastoral care. We will continue this procedure until a vaccine is widely available and widely in use.

Can a committee/group I lead or participate in meet in the church building?

That depends. If you lead a committee/church group that includes participants who are at higher risk of complications from COVID-19 (see “Who is at higher risk of complications from COVID-19?” below), then we ask that you hold meetings online or via phone or email for now. That way we’re not leaving anyone out or putting undue pressure on those who may not feel comfortable coming back to church just yet. For all other church meetings, we are strongly encouraging that meeting and event leaders hold meetings online or via phone or email.

If you choose to hold an in-person meeting/event, meeting and event leaders must adhere to very specific guidelines, including state gathering limits, room capacity guidelines and ensuring that the space is disinfected after use. All participants must wear masks at all times, including in the restroom, and maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone who is not from their own household. No food or drink may be served—indoors or outdoors—while masks are a requirement. For complete information on these guidelines, please refer to [Church Reopening Guidelines and Procedures](#).

Will the church building be available to community groups?

The short answer is yes. Community groups have access to St. James, however, they must apply for access by completing a Tenant Use Request form and signing a new building use contract, which stipulates our COVID-19 policy. Due to social distancing guidelines, we have established room capacity guidelines, and group leaders will be responsible for ensuring that the space is disinfected after use. All participants must wear masks at all times, including in the restroom, and maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone who is not from their own household. No food or drink may be served—indoors or outdoors—while masks are a requirement. For complete details on tenant building use, please refer to [Church Reopening Guidelines and Procedures](#).

Who is at higher risk of complications from COVID-19?

Older adults are at greater risk of requiring hospitalization or dying if they are diagnosed with COVID-19. As you get older, your risk of being hospitalized for COVID-19 increases. According to the CDC, 8 out of 10 COVID-19 deaths reported in the U.S. have been in adults 65 years and older.

Adults of any age with the following conditions are at increased risk of severe illness from the virus that causes COVID-19:

- Cancer
- Chronic kidney disease
- COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease)
- Immunocompromised state (weakened immune system) from solid organ transplant
- Obesity (body mass index [BMI] of 30 kg/m² or higher but <40 kg/m²)
- Severe obesity (BMI ≥40 kg/m²)
- Heart conditions, such as heart failure, coronary artery disease or cardiomyopathies
- Sickle cell disease
- Type 2 diabetes mellitus
- Down syndrome
- Smoking
- Pregnancy

Based on what the CDC knows at this time, adults of any age with the following conditions **might be at an increased** risk for severe illness from the virus that causes COVID-19:

- Asthma (moderate-to-severe)
- Cerebrovascular disease (affects blood vessels and blood supply to the brain)
- Cystic fibrosis
- Hypertension or high blood pressure
- Immunocompromised state (weakened immune system) from blood or bone marrow transplant, immune deficiencies, HIV, use of corticosteroids or use of other immune-weakening medicines
- Neurologic conditions, such as dementia
- Liver disease
- Overweight (BMI > 25 kg/m², but < 30 kg/m²)
- Pulmonary fibrosis (having damaged or scarred lung tissues)
- Thalassemia (a type of blood disorder)
- Type 1 diabetes mellitus

References:

<https://coronavirus.wa.gov/information-for/you-and-your-family/adults-65-and-over>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/COVID19-What-You-Can-Do-High-Risk.pdf>

https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/HealthyWashington.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

<https://medium.com/wagovernor/inslee-announces-healthy-washington-roadmap-to-recovery-229b880a6859>

Church Reopening FAQ: Version 4 (updated 1/14/2021)