

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, 2020, 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.)

Until a significant portion of the population has been vaccinated and the state mask mandate has been lifted, 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—regardless of vaccination status. 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 May 13, 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?

To worship with us in person, we ask that you abide by the following guidelines to keep our community safe.

- 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.
- Get your temperature taken before entering through the office door.
- All persons (ages 2 and up) must wear a **three-layer mask** (covering both nose and mouth) at all times while inside the church building, including in the restroom. (No gaiter masks allowed.) This is a mandate. If you cannot wear a three-layer 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 marked with a blue X.
- 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).

- After the service, please exit through the narthex doors.
- If you would like to participate in indoor fellowship in the church sanctuary, please continue to wear your mask and maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone who is not from your own household. Those participating in outdoor fellowship may remove their masks if they maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone not in their 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?

The following guidelines and procedures apply to anyone serving in a leadership capacity on Sundays (pastor, ushers, lectors, music leaders, fellowship hosts, etc.):

- 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. If your temperature is 100°F or greater, please exit the building.
- All persons (ages 2 and up) must wear a **three-layer mask** (covering both nose and mouth) at all times while inside the church building, including in the restroom. (No gaiter masks allowed.) 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 that includes a collection of masks, hand sanitizer and printed bulletins (for those who are not following the service via a smartphone app).
- Volunteer(s) stationed outside of the office door must take the temperature of each individual using a no-touch, hand-held thermometer and confirm that each person has registered for worship service. Entry is not permitted if an individual has not registered or if their temperature is 100°F or greater.
- 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 and printed bulletins are allowed in the pews. We will not offer name tags during this time.

- During Phase 3, congregational singing is allowed while wearing a 3-layer mask. (In Phases 1 and 2, congregational singing is not allowed.)
- During Phase 3, choir members may sing, however, each singer must maintain 6 feet of physical distancing and wear a three-layer surgical mask (provided by the church). In Phases 1 and 2, 15 singers may sing with at least 9 feet of physical distancing and a three-layer surgical mask.
- A soloist may sing without a mask provided that the singer maintains 15 feet of physical distancing.
- Brass and woodwind instruments are permitted provided that each performer maintains 9 feet of physical distancing and uses a bell cover.
- 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).
- 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.
- Fellowship may be held indoors in the sanctuary or outdoors. Indoors, participants must wear masks and maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone who is not from their own household. Outdoors, participants may remove their masks if they maintain a distance of at least 6 feet. 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 fellowship after worship service! (If you are a fellowship host, see FAQ guidance for worship leaders above.) Indoors, 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 own household. Outdoors, you may remove your mask if you maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from anyone who is not from your own household.

When can Sunday Bible Study meet?

Adult education leaders may either hold classes online or outdoors.

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?

It's recommended that meetings be held online, by phone or email, however, if a meeting is held in person, up to 10 people may be present, and all persons must wear a mask.

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

Not at this time, however, church meetings and events may be held **outside**. If participants maintain a distance of at least 6 feet, they may remove their masks while outdoors. No food or drink may be served.

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 8 (updated 5/13/2021)