



Arkansas Department of Health

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Governor Asa Hutchinson
Nathaniel Smith, MD, MPH, Secretary of Health

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Guidance on Reopening Places of Worship

The Secretary of Health, in consultation with the Governor, has sole authority over all instances of quarantine, isolation, and restrictions on commerce and travel throughout Arkansas, as necessary and appropriate to control disease in the state of Arkansas as authorized by Ark. Code Ann. §20-7-109--110. Based on available scientific evidence, it is necessary and appropriate to take further action to ensure that COVID-19 remains controlled and that residents and visitors in Arkansas remain safe.

Although places of worship were excluded from the Governor's Executive Order 20-10 issued on March 26, 2020, in conjunction with the Directive on Limitations on Gatherings, most faith leaders in Arkansas did comply with the spirit of that Directive and ceased holding worship services in person and moved worship instead to an online or outdoor platform for their congregants. The Governor issued further limitations that applied to places of worship in the Governor's Executive Order 20-13 on April 4, 2020, in conjunction with the Directive that provided further social distancing protocols.

Arkansas has seen a large increase in COVID-19 case numbers since Phase 1 of Reopening Arkansas began on May 4. Our analysis of the data since reopening shows that asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic people with COVID-19 are going to places of worship. In places where the guidelines below are being followed, we are not seeing transmission occur. But in places where people are not observing the guidance on masking and practicing physical distancing, we are seeing many cases of transmission within faith communities. Therefore, during Phase 2 of Reopening Arkansas, places of worship need to continue to comply with the following guidance:

- Houses of worship are **strongly encouraged to continue to offer online platforms** for participation in worship because it is not yet advisable/feasible for all congregants to come for in-person services
- Post signs at all building entrances advising congregants not to enter if
 - They have had a fever of 100.4° or higher in the past 2 days
 - They have cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell or other symptoms typical of Covid-19
 - They have had known exposure to someone with Covid-19 in the past 14 days
- Post signs at all building entrances advising congregants that they may wish to refrain from entering if they are 65 or more years old or have underlying health conditions including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, severe obesity, asthma or immunocompromising conditions, because they are at higher risk for severe illness if infected by Covid-19.

- Post signs at all building entrances to inform people that **no one** will be admitted into the building without a face covering and **that face coverings must be worn by congregants at all times while indoors**. The only exceptions to the wearing of face coverings will be:
 - Worship leaders, only while addressing the congregation
 - Performing singers, only while singing
 - The above individuals must stand at a 12' distance from others while speaking or singing without a face covering
 - All congregants who participate in Holy Communion, only while actually consuming the Elements
 - Face coverings for children under 10 years are optional
 - Face coverings for children under 2 years old are prohibited by CDC guidelines
 - Places of worship may make their own decision on whether to allow children under ten to return to corporate worship, as this may pose some risk of transmission of Covid-19
- Provide hand sanitizing stations at all public entrances.
- Lines or cues for entrance and exit must be marked or monitored for maintaining a distance of 6 feet between people.
- Instruct all congregants, staff and volunteers that the strict 6' physical distancing protocol applies to everyone aside from family groups, both indoors and outdoors. As above, speakers and singers will require additional distance while speaking or singing without face coverings.
- As much as possible, move "meet and greet" times before and after services outdoors. Because of the indoor face covering requirement, refreshments should be offered outdoors only.
- Instruct people to refrain from any physical contact with each other outside of family groups—no hand shaking, touching, embracing, or reverencing of hands/rings of clergy.
- Aside from congregant family groups, seating in the sanctuary must follow strict physical distancing protocols with 6' between individuals.
- Eliminate or alter the use of items that are traditionally touched or handled by many different people. Examples are offering plates, the Torah (touch only by the bearer), holy water stations, shared prayer and song books, and the common cup (chalice) for Holy Communion.
- If possible, refrain from having people come forward to a common altar rail for Holy Communion, blessing, altar call, etc.
- Religious education classes for children/youth or childcare may resume if this can be accomplished in compliance with physical distancing.
- Sanitize all high-touch surfaces in the sanctuary and common areas after and between services.