

Guidance for Advent and Christmas Worship and Fellowship

Introduction

As we are writing these materials (November 2020), the coronavirus pandemic has increased to its highest daily case rates to date in large parts of the United States.

We are committed to care-filled practices in worship. If *any* of the following are true for the county where you live, we recommend you do not meet indoors.

- The number of new cases is rising
- ICU occupancy rates average above 80%
- The Georgia Tech Risk Assessment Tool ranks your county above 40% likelihood for someone being present with COVID-19 at a 10 to 1 ascertainment bias (<https://covid19risk.biosci.gatech.edu/>)

Our guidance for any public, in person activities is intended for use under *these* conditions:

1) New cases are low and stable or declining over the previous two weeks. Check state and local public health announcements regarding recommendations for public gatherings and activities.

2) All participants are properly masked at all times.

3) All participants not living in the same household maintain a distance of at least 6 feet (2 meters). Brief, *liturgically essential* breaches of the 6 foot distance (such as for serving communion, or at a baptism) will not exceed 15 minutes in any 24 hour period.

4) All participants have no symptoms of COVID-19 and have not been knowingly exposed to persons who have tested positive for COVID-19 or have had any symptoms of COVID-19 within the past two weeks.

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Advent

Creating Advent Wreaths / Advent Workshops

Principles:

The Advent wreath is about *marking time* and *telling stories*. In the four weeks of the Season of Advent, we prepare our homes, hearts, and communities for the culmination of all things at Christ's return and for the celebration of the Incarnation. The Advent wreath helps us visually and physically to mark that time of preparation and anticipation in an intentional way. Readings and prayer may accompany the lighting of each candle. Denominations and congregations provide a variety of resources for people to observe the lighting of the Advent wreath as part of daily devotional practices in their homes.

Many communities have the practice of creating Advent wreaths, either by gathering together in some space or by providing instructions for how to do so at home. This sometimes takes the form of an Advent workshop, a large group gathering at which other crafts or activities may occur, devotional materials are distributed, and worship and fellowship may be shared.

It may not be advisable to host such events indoors for larger groups of people at this time. We offer three alternatives.

Practices:

1. If weather allows, plan an event to assemble Advent wreaths *outdoors*, perhaps sheltered under a tent with ample ventilation. Provide floral foam wreaths and greens as well as candles, but have individual households bring their own gloves, shears, etc. Where space for distancing is limited, invite people to sign up for shifts throughout an afternoon so that only a few households are assembling wreaths at any given time and distancing can be maintained.
2. Provide instructions for how to make an advent wreath *at home*. Greens could be cut from a household's yard, or provided at the church building for contactless pick up. Instructions could be sent out via email, postal mail, or provided for pick up in the form of a small wreath-making kit. Families and individuals could also be encouraged to create a "found object" wreath using materials and candles they already have at home.
3. Consider posting a series of videos *online* to share within a congregation and perhaps post to YouTube. These videos could be both instructional and devotional in nature. The first installment might explain some history and meaning of the Advent wreath. Subsequent videos might include short

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readings, prayers, and songs that could be used on the Sundays and weekdays of Advent for wreath lighting in the home.

Lighting Advent Wreaths during Public Worship

Principles:

The lighting of the Advent wreath as part of public worship is best done as part of the gathering or entry rite. A different family, individual, or other group (altar guild, women's group, Sunday School class, etc.) may be given the opportunity to light the candle(s) and read the appropriate texts each Sunday.

Practices:

1. Limit the lighting of the candles and accompanying readings / prayers to members of co-sheltering households.
2. Shorten other elements of the service as needed to accommodate the additional time required for this rite so the overall length of the service is not changed.
3. Consider as an alternative placing a large wreath outside the church building that may be lit by electric / flameless candles before people arrive for worship. A rite for lighting could be held outdoors for those who wish to witness it before worship begins. An outdoor wreath could also remain lit throughout the week as a witness to the wider community of how some Christians keep time during this season.

Hanging of the Greens

Principles:

Hanging of the Greens may be observed as a special service or as a church decoration project. Some traditions observe it following the last Sunday of the Season after Pentecost (Christ the King/Reign of Christ), as a preparation for Advent, while others observe it near or on the last day of Advent, as a preparation for the Christmas Season. Worship services for this purpose typically involve readings, prayers, and congregational or choral singing, and possibly a reception for fellowship afterward. When approached more as a church decoration project, people may stay after worship, or come at a later, designated time, and listen to or sing songs of the season as they decorate. A reception may also follow.

None of our traditions has a "prescribed" ritual for this practice, whether as a service or as a group project.

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What unites the various practices across our traditions is setting apart a specific period of time in the church's worship space to add greenery and other decorations for the season(s) about to be observed. All such practices tend to involve gatherings of people from several households for an extended time, and many involve group singing or an additional reception in some form.

All three of these elements-- gathering people from different households in an indoor location for an extended period of time, group singing, and receptions-- are *strongly discouraged* during the pandemic.

Commended Practices:

1. Plan the decoration process as a series of individual pilgrimages by co-sheltering households who will sign up for a particular task in the project at a particular time.
2. Schedule household pilgrimages at least three hours apart from each other and any other group use of the building, with no pilgrimage lasting longer than 30 minutes. This will allow time for cleaning or disinfecting between pilgrimages and for aerosols produced during the pilgrimage to dissipate. All household members must be masked at all times and avoid singing or loud speech while in the building.
3. Consider providing live seasonal instrumental music on piano, strings, organ, or other non-breath instruments during each pilgrimage. Or create a playlist of songs performed by your instrumentalists or (safely recorded) vocalists for each pilgrimage.
4. Consider recording each session for later compositing into a video for the congregation to view at a post-decoration online reception. Provide songsheets and recipes for food and drink congregants can share in their homes as they view the video.

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Christmas Season

Christmas Eve Candle Lighting

Principles:

In many churches, the highlight of a Christmas Eve service involves dimming the lights, lighting candles from one person to the next (perhaps assisted by acolytes), and singing “Silent Night” together. The quietness enhanced by darkness, the sharing of the light, the warmth and glow of the candle, and the singing of a familiar, contemplative song work together to create a moment of solemnity, solidarity, and beauty that stirs the heart and nourishes the soul of the gathered community. For many people, this moment *is* Christmas.

We cannot commend congregational singing nor the sharing of the light across co-sheltering households during this pandemic.

Commended Practices:

1. **Limited total service time:** Keep the overall service within the same limits as a Sunday morning service (around 30 minutes indoors, possibly a bit longer if outdoors). Our recommended practice for distributing the light may take substantially longer. Planning should account for this so that the time limit for the overall service is still observed.
2. **Limited exposure to a limited number of people:** The pastor and others who assist at the chancel may carry the light directly to physically distanced, co-sheltering households throughout the space, lighting one candle per household.

The rest of the candles in that household may be lit from that candle. Light should not be shared from one household to another.

3. **Limited vocal music:**

Indoors: A soloist or small vocal ensemble (4–6 people at maximum, depending on room size), masked, and spaced at least 20 feet from all other people, may sing “Silent Night.” Or the song may simply be played on non-breath instruments. The congregation does not sing.

Outdoors: If individuals and co-sheltering households maintain a distance of at least 16 feet from each other and are masked, congregational singing may be possible for this action. Wind may make lighting candles impractical. Consider inviting people to bring and use flashlights or lights on their phones or tablets at this time. Places where people or groups may safely stand while singing should be measured and clearly marked.

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Vigil of The Holy Innocents

Principles:

The Vigil of The Holy Innocents is a vigil of prayer, contemplation, and meditation on scripture by individuals, families, or small groups of people who come to the church—and more typically to a specific chapel or room or area of the church—at designated times (often for one-hour shifts) to create a practice of continuous prayer and contemplation of those who died under Herod's order to exterminate male children in Judea under the age of two years. The vigil is also held to remember all children and all people who die as casualties of violence and oppression. It is typically held from the night hours on the Eve of Holy Innocents (December 27 after sundown) until a concluding service or morning prayer or Eucharist the next day.

During the pandemic in general, we cannot recommend that persons of different households gather at the same place on church grounds as those immediately preceding them. Nor do we recommend that "shifts" for individuals or households exceed 30 minutes. Because of high and increasing rates of infection at this writing (November 23, 2020), we recommend considering doing the vigil online or in their own homes rather than bringing people to the church campus in person.

Commended Practices:

1. **Multiple stations, no two in the same room**, may be set up indoors. Outdoor locations may be considered where safe and where weather allows. Alternatively, individuals or households may remain in their cars, parked in designated and well-lit spaces. We do not commend this option in colder climates that would require additional fuel consumption to maintain safe body temperatures.
2. **Limited shift length:** Individuals or groups from a co-sheltering household may sign up for one 30-minute shift at a particular location during the vigil.
3. **Limited space re-usage:** Indoor spaces may be used once every three hours for a 30-minute shift if disinfection of the space is available *and* if ventilation of the space will have provided at least one complete replacement of the air in that space during that time period. If both cannot be provided, indoor spaces should not be reused during the vigil. Outdoors spaces may be used for one shift every other hour.
4. **If there will be a concluding service of morning prayer or Eucharist, we recommend that it be held outdoors** where possible, or, if indoors, in a space that was not used during the vigil and that can accommodate the anticipated crowd size with appropriate physical distancing (6 feet or 2 meters) between individuals and households.

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