

Guidance for Gatherings Outdoors

Introduction

Many parts of the United States are experiencing their worst outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of this writing (November 2020).

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/>)

In all cases, our guidance assumes these basic conditions:

- 1) New cases are low and stable or declining over the previous two weeks
- 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) at all times.
- 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.
- 5) No participant or worship leader will be expected to be within six feet of any participant or worship leader for more than 15 minutes within any 24 hour period.

Principles

The first mass gathering of the Christian Church was outdoors on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13). While some early Christian gatherings happened inside homes or other indoor spaces, many also occurred outdoors in courtyard spaces. To this day, many Christian worship gatherings, worldwide, still occur outdoors.

Many worship spaces and many congregations have lost the sense of worship with and amid the natural and built creation as normal and even normative. Air conditioning and climate control and air handling systems in more recent years have increased the isolation of indoor Christian gatherings. Today, in the face of a global pandemic caused by an airborne virus that thrives in the more enclosed, less ventilated spaces, gatherings outdoors have re-emerged as a significantly safer alternative to gatherings indoors.

Guidance for Gatherings Outdoors

Theology: “The Heavens are Telling the Glory of God”

The current pandemic has provided an opportunity for congregations to consider outdoor gatherings for a greater variety of occasions and on a more regular basis than they may have done in recent memory. While we might consider this an inconvenience or a temporary matter until the pandemic is resolved, it could also be an occasion for churches to reconsider and reaffirm the strong connections of Christian faith and practice and the creation, and so reassess the longer-term relationships between the use of built space and natural space, as well as churches' reliance on built space as the default even when outdoor spaces are available.

Practical Considerations for Worship Outdoors

Meeting outdoors is not less for Christians at worship. But it is different.

There are some core practices of Christian ritual that must be continued for the Christian community to recognize itself as such. These include the reading of scripture, proclaiming the word, prayer, praise, baptism, Holy Communion, confirmation, and the “life rites” of marriage and the burial of the dead. For the well being of the church, judicatories or other bodies will also need to continue acts of ordination, commissioning, consecration, or other rites conveying authority in various forms of ministry.

When we meet outdoors, we may have fewer restrictions on time and on activities than when we meet indoors. During the pandemic, our outdoor gatherings may be able to last a little longer (up to 45 minutes) than if they were indoors. We may be able to have more flexibility with how singing may be offered (masked, with singers at least 12 feet away from any other person).

When we meet outdoors there are also a number of other things to take into account that we may not have considered when we were meeting indoors.

1. Bless the space.

Most of us in our various traditions take care to offer thanks and seek God's blessing upon indoor worship spaces such as sanctuaries, chapels, or prayer rooms, as well as such focal points as pulpits, fonts, and Lord's Tables before they enter into their sacred use. Consider offering an act of blessing for the outdoor space and its focal points as well.

2. Be considerate of neighbors.

Even without congregational singing, Christian worship can make considerable sound. While you will want to make sure all who attend are able to hear what is said, played, or sung by a soloist or small ensemble, your neighbors may or may not want to hear that. Consider where you can place your outdoor service so it is minimally obtrusive to your neighbors.

Guidance for Gatherings Outdoors

Traffic or parking could be an additional issue. If your outdoor space is limited to a parking lot, worshipers will need to find other places to park. Find places where they do not take spaces from neighbors, and/or work with neighbors to find some agreed upon spaces for parking during outdoor worship gatherings.

3. Be accessible.

Everyone needs to be able to get to and from the space safely, and, if they can hear and see, to do so as well as possible. Emergency workers also need full access to the space and to the people should a medical or other emergency arise.

--Minimize uneven surfaces.

Uneven surfaces can present accessibility challenges for people with mobility challenges, as well as those using wheelchairs and other mobility or emergency equipment.

--Maximize sightlines to leaders and focal places.

Sightlines are very important for all people to hear and feel included, and especially for people with hearing impairments. Arrange worship space to keep as clear as possible the sightlines to worship leaders, ASL interpreters, and focal places of worship (pulpit, Lord's table, font, etc.).

4. Be "sun-conscious."

Know where the sun will be shining on your outdoor worship space at the time of day you will meet. Arrange seating to avoid worshipers and worship leaders staring into the sun or becoming overheated. And remind worshipers to use appropriate skin protection.

5. Rehearse.

Worship outdoors creates different patterns of sound and movement than worship indoors. Plan a sound check for everyone with a speaking or singing role and do a cue to cue rehearsal for each point where transition or movement takes place so worship outdoors will sound and flow as effectively as worship indoors. Be sure to include ushers and greeters as part of the rehearsal so everyone is ready to move in and out of the worship area smoothly.

6. Promote reverence.

An outdoor environment may "read" to many as more "casual" than reverent. Consider how the arrangement of seating, the prominence of visual symbols, what worship leaders wear, how worship leaders address the congregation and God in word, song, and silence, and how people are greeted and led to their seating may contribute to promoting an atmosphere of reverence in your outdoor worship services.

Guidance for Gatherings Outdoors

7. Remember you are outdoors.

Being outdoors means there will be birds, bugs, and other animals moving through the worship space. So, if you are celebrating communion, you will need to keep bread and wine covered until use. There may also be sounds of emergency vehicles, airplanes, trains, and other sonic events at times which you did not anticipate. Some may be easily ignored. Others may become a genuine distraction. Decide with your worship team beforehand the ways you will respond to such distractions, and follow the response plan you create.

8. Develop several versions of a Plan B.

Have clear plans in place for unexpected changes in conditions or emergencies.

In all circumstances, basic pandemic safety protocols apply. Masks should continue to be worn at all times. Physical distancing between persons not in the same household must be maintained.

Possible emergency situations require pre-planning, especially given the additional logistical challenges of moving a gathered group of people safely during a pandemic.

Emergency plans should include the kinds of events that would trigger an emergency response, who will provide leadership to the people gathered, how and when people will be instructed and guided safely to another location or to evacuate, and provision for emergency equipment and personnel to access persons needing emergency attention.

Acknowledgments

The Consultation thanks The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Emory University/Candler School of Theology, The Liturgical Conference, and The Styberg Preaching Institute for partnership to support the creation and distribution of these resources.