COVID-19 Guidance for Faith Communities and Faith-based Organizations

Novel coronavirus is a virus that has only spread as a disease (COVID-19) in people since December 2019. The disease spreads person-to-person through coughing, sneezing and close personal contact. This includes touching a surface with the virus on it and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that COVID-19 is most contagious when a person shows symptoms. However, the disease may also spread before symptoms appear. COVID-19 has the potential to cause severe illness or death. There is no cure or vaccine at this time.

Governor Kate Brown issued a series of executive orders to help slow the spread of COVID-19:

- Executive Order 20-07 issued March 17, 2020:
  - Prohibits gatherings of 25 or more people.
- Executive Order 20-14 issued April 7, 2020:
  - Amends Executive Order 20-07 so it remains in effect until the Governor ends it.
  - Directs Oregonians to stay home as much as possible for at least 90 days unless the Governor ends it early or extends it.

Recent modeling shows that these efforts are helping to “flatten the curve” or slow the spread of illness. These efforts:

- Reduce the number of people seriously ill at any one time
- Preserve our hospital capacity to care for those most in need.

Despite this positive news, we are still in the middle of the outbreak and must continue to “Stay Home, Save Lives." We recognize that this creates particular challenges for faith-based organizations that play an important role in the lives of many Oregonians.

The following guidance for faith-based organizations may help reduce exposure to COVID-19 and slow its spread:

The best way to stay healthy and prevent the spread of COVID-19 is to stay home. Oregonians must also limit things they do outside their home to essential activities, such as:

- Shopping for food
- Picking up medicines.

The Governor’s order does not allow gatherings, including religious observances, where people cannot keep 6 feet apart. Also, the order does not allow social events and business where people come into close contact.

It may feel difficult to be apart during times when faith communities traditionally come together for religious observances and celebrations. Please know that the sacrifice you are making by staying home will help us together to save lives in our community.

Faith community precautions

Encourage members of your community to follow guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. There is currently no vaccine or cure for COVID-19. However, there are steps you can take to prevent its spread.

The most effective strategies to prevent infection include the physical distancing measures mandated by the Governor’s Executive Orders. Also, practice basic hand hygiene and covering your cough or sneeze. All Oregonians must do the following:

- Avoid all social and recreational activities in which a distance of at least 6 feet between people cannot be kept.
- Keep at least 6 feet from others during any necessary trips to grocery stores, pharmacies or health care entities.
- Cover coughs or sneezes in the bend of the arm or with a tissue and throw it away.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth.
- Clean hands regularly and thoroughly with regular soap and water or use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol.
- Isolate if sick. Stay away from work, family and friends until 72 hours after both fever and cough resolve, without the use of medication.

In uncertain times, faith leaders have a key role to play. They offer comfort and care to many burdened by illness, worry, isolation and economic hardship. We appreciate the opportunity to work together to lessen these burdens by reducing the spread of COVID-19.
Faith community FAQs

Our church has many different rooms. We could keep gatherings to 10 people or fewer per room. If our church can keep 6 feet of distance between people who attend, can we hold services?

All gatherings of more than 25 people are canceled statewide until the Governor ends Executive Order 20-07. Even if a gathering of more than 25 people could be divided into groups of 10 or fewer per room, this would violate the Governor’s orders. The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) recommends that gatherings of any size be canceled, especially for those in high-risk populations, which include:

- Older adults
- People with underlying medical conditions.

Please remember that physical distancing is meant to protect our most vulnerable citizens from COVID-19.

We have a small congregation. Fewer than 25 people attend our services regularly. Can we hold services if we make sure people stay 6 feet apart by blocking off pews, for example?

OHA recommends that gatherings of any size be canceled, especially for those in high-risk populations, which include:

- Older adults
- People with underlying medical conditions.

To help keep the members of your faith community safe, please consider virtual or recorded services. If you choose to hold services for fewer than 25 people, you must ensure physical distancing of at least 6 feet for all people from different households. People living in the same household do not require 6 feet of physical distancing.

Our church wants to hold services drive-in style in our parking lot. Is this allowed?

The Governor’s executive order permits this type of service if a few conditions are met:

1. Physical distancing must be kept. If people will have their car windows open, there should be one open space between each parked car to make sure the distance is kept.

2. People need to stay in their cars. If they exit their cars, to sit in lawn chairs, for example, this would become a social gathering. The executive order does not permit social gatherings.

3. There may not be any communion distribution.

4. Any use of the church building would need to be kept to a minimum and ideally avoided altogether. Any use would also need to be in line with physical distancing policies.
What are the best practices for communion during this time?

Suspend any practices that involve a common cup. Suspend distribution of communion to keep a physical distance of at least 6 feet between people.

May we continue to perform private ceremonies for families, such as small baptisms, weddings and other major life events?

OHA recommends that gatherings of any size be canceled, especially for those in high-risk populations, which include:

- Older adults
- People with underlying medical conditions.

All gatherings, including religious observances for major life events, should be postponed until the threat of COVID-19 has passed. Whether a ceremony or an event should proceed is left to the discretion of the faith community. To help keep the members of your faith community and our broader community safe, please consider virtual or recorded services.

What should we do about funerals?

Social gathering rules apply to funerals as well. Fewer than 25 people may attend a funeral. However, make sure you have 6 feet of physical distancing for all people from different households. OHA recommends that gatherings of any size be canceled, especially for those in high-risk populations, which include:

- Older adults
- People with underlying medical conditions.

To help keep the members of your faith community and our broader community safe, please consider virtual or recorded services.

Our faith community wants to help those who are most in need during this time. This includes people experiencing homelessness. Can we provide bathroom or shower services to those in need? Can we let them use our parking lots to sleep in?

Allowing homeless citizens to access bathroom or shower service is permitted. However, you must ensure at least 6 feet of physical distancing. Consider additional cleaning measures. Example are frequently cleaning surfaces that are touched often, this includes doorknobs and faucets.

Contact your local city or county government to get information and guidance about the use of parking lots.

Our observance includes fasting, meal sharing and group prayers. What sort of gathering is allowed under the executive order?

Fasting is an important aspect of many religions. However, most allow exceptions for the young, old or those with health conditions. We encourage faith members to discuss how fasting should be used with their faith community leaders.
All gatherings of more than 25 people are canceled statewide until the Governor ends Executive Order 20-07. Gatherings of fewer than 25 people are only allowed if physical distancing of at least 6 feet can be kept for all people from different households. People from the same household are not required to keep physical distancing. OHA recommends that gatherings of any size be canceled, especially for those in high-risk populations, which include:

- Older adults
- People with underlying medical conditions.

To help keep the members of your faith community and our broader community safe, please consider virtual or recorded services.

**Can faith facilities or faith leaders be used to serve the health sector specifically?**

The state Office of Emergency Management has set up an online form where partners can offer services or volunteer.

**Accessibility:** Everyone has a right to know about and use Oregon Health Authority (OHA) programs and services. OHA provides free help. Some examples of the free help OHA can provide are sign language and spoken language interpreters, written materials in other languages, Braille, large print, audio and other formats. If you need help or have questions, please contact Mavel Morales at 1-844-882-7889, 711 TTY, OHA.ADAModifications@dhsoha.state.or.us.