

Considerations for Spiritual and Religious Gatherings during COVID-19

Though never required to close, in recent months, many churches and other religious organizations voluntarily suspended normal operations to slow the spread of COVID-19. On April 28, 2020, Governor Kristi Noem released a, “Back to Normal” Plan for South Dakotans. Accordingly, as churches and other spiritual organizations begin taking steps to return to normal, they are asked to consider the following.

- ❖ Where possible, **consider offering or continuing to offer remote access to services**. Staying at home whenever possible continues to be the best way to slow the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, holding remote worship service or continuing to offer remote access will help protect those who should continue to avoid gatherings, especially our most vulnerable South Dakotans with preexisting medical conditions and those older than 65.
- ❖ Consider restricting occupancy for in-person gatherings or offering other innovative solutions (i.e. conducting services outdoors, holding smaller services throughout the week or weekend, or offering drive-in vehicle events). In communicating with congregants about these measures, consider encouraging high-risk individuals not to attend in-person services.
- ❖ Follow CDC [cleaning and disinfection measures](#) for all in-person religious gatherings. This means a house of worship must be sanitized regularly. Pay extra attention to high contact areas such as floors, doorknobs, pews etc. Where possible, consider designating separate entry and exit points to establish a one-way traffic pattern. Doors may be propped open or held open by ushers to prevent congregants from touching them, and hand sanitizer should be available for use throughout the facility.
- ❖ Communion service should be individualized and conducted in a manner to minimize close interaction, and any offering collection should avoid a common plate or container that is passed from person-to-person.
- ❖ Apply [social distancing guidelines](#). Facilities should move chairs or designate seating areas to ensure the ability of congregants that are not members of the same household to sit at least six feet apart.
- ❖ Congregants should be discouraged from shaking hands or otherwise engaging in physical contact.
- ❖ Consider additional guidance offered by the CDC for [Community and Faith-Based Organizations](#) as appropriate.