



April 6, 2021

As vaccination rates begin to rise and infection rates decline in some areas, the urge to return to public spaces and remove limitations is understandably strong. While there is certainly light on the horizon, [only 17% of Virginians are fully vaccinated](#) and new strains of COVID-19 are emerging which pose a significant risk for another spike in infections. The Virginia Synod Office of the Bishop, therefore, strongly urges congregations to continue to gather predominantly in the digital space and to avoid in-person gatherings unless they are essential to the life and ministry of the congregation. Let us remain steadfast in our resolve to love our neighbor.

For those who choose to gather in-person indoors or outdoors, the Virginia Synod Office of the Bishop urges everyone to follow [Executive Order 72 Amendment 4](#) (EQ 72 4) from Virginia Governor Northam which went into effect on April 1, 2021. Amendment 4 (EQ 72 4) increases the limits on indoor and outdoor gatherings. The guidelines state that:

- **All public and private in-person gatherings of more than 50 individuals indoors and 100 individuals outdoors are prohibited.** A “gathering” includes, but is not limited to, parties, celebrations, or other social events, whether they occur indoors or outdoors. (EQ 72 4, Section 1, Subsection B, paragraph 1, pg 10)

Even though exceptions are allowed for religious services under the Governor’s Executive Order, given the limits on other public gatherings and research on how COVID-19 is spread, we recommend that congregations adhere to the limits placed on other sectors of society. For example, the **requirements in EQ 72 4th Amendment, Point 10 covering ‘Entertainment and Amusement Businesses’** including movie theaters, concerts, performing arts venues, and private social clubs could provide helpful guidance for congregations when considering your space and how many people may participate in an indoor or outdoor worship service. Those guidelines state that for the Entertainment and Amusement Business:

- The total number of spectators **indoors cannot exceed the lesser of 30 percent of the lowest occupancy load** on the certificate of occupancy, if applicable, or 500 persons. The total number of spectators for **outdoor venues cannot exceed 30 percent of the lowest occupancy load** on the certificate of occupancy. If no occupancy load has been determined, a **ratio of 40 square feet per person** shall be used to determine occupancy limits. (EQ 72 4, pg 7)

The **following guidelines exist and are still essential measures for all individuals attending religious services, whether they are vaccinated or not:** (EQ 72 4, pg. 11)

- Practice proper physical distancing at all times.
- Mark seating and common areas where attendees may congregate in six-foot increments to maintain physical distancing.
- Ensure that any items used to distribute food or beverages either should be disposable or washed or cleaned between uses between individuals who are not Family members.
- Conduct routine cleaning and disinfection of frequently-contacted surfaces prior to and following any religious service.
- Post signage at the entrance that states that no one with a fever or symptoms of COVID-19 is permitted to participate in the religious service.
- Post signage to provide public health reminders regarding physical distancing, gatherings, options for high risk individuals, and staying home if sick.
- Wear masks over their nose and mouth in accordance with section II below.
- Post signage at the entrance of all indoor areas stating that individuals must wear a mask in accordance with this Order.
- Parties attending religious services must be seated at least six feet apart from other parties.
- If religious services cannot be conducted in compliance with the above requirements, they must not be held in-person.
- **Any social gathering held in connection with a religious service is subject to the public and private in-person gatherings restriction** in section I, subsection B, paragraph 1. *(For example, under EQ 72 4, a congregation with enough space may be permitted to have 75 people indoors for a worship service, but once the worship service is over, the 50 person indoor gathering limit applies. All 75 people in worship, therefore, could not move to the fellowship hall for a social gathering.)*

These continue to be stressful days, and we, in the Office of the Bishop, know that you are engaged in hard decisions. We are keeping you in our prayers. We encourage you to remember one another in prayer, to care for your siblings in Christ, and to support one another, especially your leaders, in this stressful time.