



Return to Worship Plan (5/15/2020)

Purpose

This plan is intended to document procedures to enable the resumption of normal church services following the issuance of Executive Order GA-18 by Texas Governor Greg Abbott on April 27, 2020 (<https://gov.texas.gov/>). The plan follows the guidelines for religious services issued jointly by the Governor and Attorney General (<https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/>), the amended “Stay Home, Work Safe” order issued by Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo on May 1, (<https://www.readyharris.org/Stay-Safe>), and advice from the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod. Technical guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control has also been incorporated (<https://www.cdc.gov>). Any additional requirements mandated by future state and local ordinances will be incorporated as needed.

The plan strives to enable CTS to resume worship services in a safe and responsible manner, prioritizing the health and safety of staff, service volunteers, and the congregation. It documents procedures for the main church activities but cannot envision every situation that may arise in the coming months. Staff, service volunteers, and congregational members should always be guided by the latest health advisories from state and local officials and their own good judgement when considering situations not covered in this document.

Outline

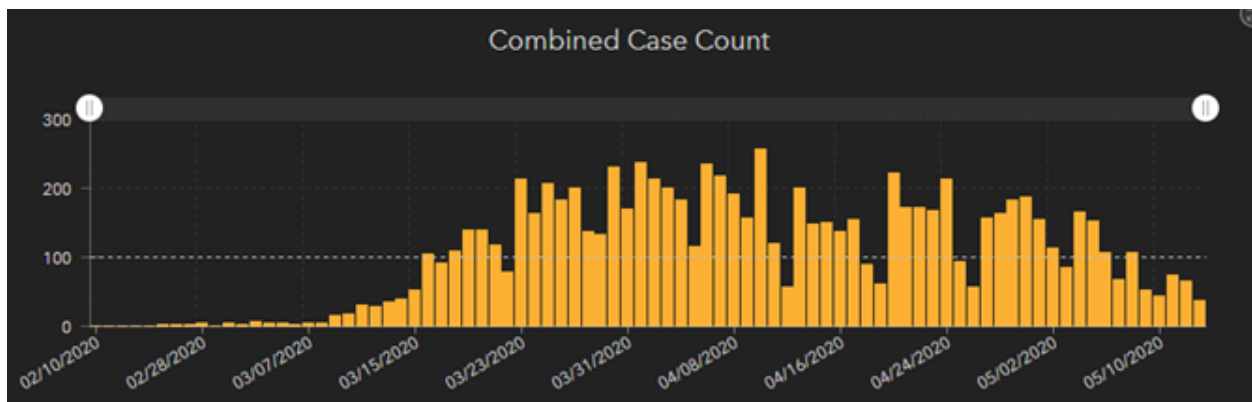
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Definitions

- Vulnerable Members: over the age of 65 or with serious underlying medical conditions or immune-system compromised
- Social Distancing: maintaining a ~6 foot buffer between people not from the same household

Timeline

The plan uses a phased approach that targets returning to in-person worship services (subject to governmental restrictions) on **May 31 (Pentecost)**, followed by resumption of various ministries in **July** if conditions allow. The governmental restrictions are expected to remain in effect so long as the coronavirus is still prevalent at significant levels in Harris County. The status of the pandemic in Harris County is documented daily on the Harris County/Houston COVID-19 Dashboard (<https://harriscounty.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/c0de71f8ea484b85bb5efcb7c07c6914>). An example of the daily confirmed case count for Houston and unincorporated Harris County from May 15 is shown below.



The CTS staff and Council will continually assess how well the plan meets the stated objective, capturing and incorporating lessons learned from worship services and ministries throughout the course of the summer. These assessments may result in future revisions to the plan which will be communicated to the congregation. Futures revisions may also be necessary if state and local officials issue new orders to respond to new waves of the pandemic. In all cases CTS will adhere to legal requirements and the best available advice from health experts for conducting services. The plan will be discontinued if all relevant orders from state and local officials expire and the virus is eventually rendered harmless by advances in treatment, a vaccine, or the achievement of “herd immunity” in the broader community.

Worship Services

We will continue to hold two services at 8:00 and 11:00. All service volunteer roles will continue (Ushers, Greeters, Acolyte, Lector, Cantor, Alter Guild, Liturgical Assistant). Some changes in how these roles should be performed are described in more detail below. At this time, the maximum recommended attendance under the Governor's Executive Order is 25% of total seating capacity (the total capacity for the CTS sanctuary is 238 persons). Given our normal summer attendance levels we do not expect to exceed the 25% limit for either service (~60 persons per service). However, in the event that attendance exceeds expectations, we will adhere to the 25% limit by seating overflow attendees in the Narthex, with required social distancing. We will develop additional contingency plans for overflow seating in the fall and winter should the 25% limit still be in effect.

We recognize that in the current environment some people may not feel safe in social gatherings. We leave it to each individual to decide whether he or she is comfortable attending in-person worship and will certainly respect that decision. For our vulnerable members and those who prefer to not attend in person we will continue to make services available for viewing on the internet. For those members who do choose to attend in person, we urge you to practice good hygiene, wash your hands, and follow the medical guidance of the CDC or your personal physician. **If you are experiencing symptoms (cough, fever, chills, etc.) we strongly encourage you seek medical attention and stay at home until you have recovered. People with obvious symptoms will not be seated by the ushers.**

A number of changes will be made to the service to try to prevent the possible spread of the virus. These changes include the following:

- Ushers will guide people to their seats when entering the sanctuary. Ushers will wear masks while seating attendees. Some rows will be cordoned off. Family members will continue to be seated together. We recognize that some of our members may not be able to sit in the seats to which they are accustomed, and the ushers will try their best to accommodate everyone's wishes. We also recognize that it may take a bit longer to seat all members and ask you to plan your arrival time accordingly.
- Hymnals, Bibles, worship booklets, pens, and attendance pads will be removed from the pews in the sanctuary.

- A self-contained worship booklet will be created each Sunday and will include hymns and lessons that can be discarded after each service. This booklet will be handed out by the Greeters, who will wear masks and gloves while doing this. For those interested in going paperless, a QR code will be available at the entrance to the sanctuary. Congregants can simply scan the code with the camera on their phone or tablet and it should bring up an electronic copy of the bulletin
- Gloves and masks will be provided for those who wish to use them but will not be required in the sanctuary unless mandated by local authorities.
- The offering plate will be placed on a table in the center aisle for people to use when they enter or exit.
- We will refrain from shaking hands or hugging at this time. We will pass the peace only to people seated nearby with a simple bow and greeting.
- We recognize that there may be anxiety concerning receiving communion and are devoting extra attention to hygiene and sanitation. The Pastor and Liturgical Assistant will wash their hands thoroughly prior to preparing the communion offering. Masks and gloves will be worn by the Pastor and Liturgical Assistant when distributing communion. The communion will be received from a single continuous line with members spaced appropriately. The elements will be consecrated without being touched by the Pastor. Wine and grape juice will be distributed in plastic cups that are spaced in the trays so as to avoid touching one another. The cups will be discarded after each service. The wafers will be emptied onto the paten without touching them. The wafer and wine or grape juice will be distributed to recipients without touching the recipient's hands. The Pastor and Liturgical Assistant will commune last to avoid possible contamination of the elements.
- The ushers will dismiss people by row. Attendees should not shake hands with the Pastor and other service volunteers when exiting the sanctuary. A simple bow of the head and warm greeting should suffice.

Music

We will continue to use music as a key part of the worship experience. We recognize the perceived risks of spreading the virus via aerosols when singing. This is the subject of much scientific debate, but at this time there are no additional

stricter recommendations from the CDC to guide our actions. To mitigate this perceived risk the choir will perform from the risers to provide increased social distancing (20+ feet) between the choir and seated attendees. The Cantor may also perform from the risers. For congregational singing, attendees will be encouraged to hold their music sheets up 6-12 inches in front of their faces to mitigate the risk of projecting aerosols to neighboring rows.

The choir at CTS will have a different look modelled on our podcasts – a limited ensemble (a trio or quartet) with strict attention to adequate spacing between members. It is anticipated that this will more resemble a worship team with rotating singers and music chosen so as not to expose them as soloists while staying true to the scripture readings and seasons of the church year. This arrangement can also accommodate solo instrumentalists and/or percussionists. Hopefully, we can eventually resume in the fall with more “normal” fare and an Advent cantata. John Krueger will keep Cantors and choir members informed of any changes or updates over the summer.

Service Volunteers

Service volunteers will continue to play very important roles in our worship services. These include the Acolytes, the Altar Guild, the Greeters, the Lectors, the Cantors, the Liturgical Assistants, and the Ushers. It is understood if any volunteers do not wish to continue service during this extraordinary time. They should simply communicate this to their service leader and accommodations will be made for the service. For those still desiring to serve, any specific changes required to ensure adequate hygiene and sanitation to prevent virus spread are best agreed with their service leader prior to the resumption of in-person services on May 31.

Facilities

The office will remain open during normal business hours. Staff may occasionally work from home as the situation dictates. Their contact details may be found on the CTS website (<https://www.christtheservant.net/>).

The facility will adopt sanitation and signage protocols recommended by the CDC. Many of the standards were already being practiced by our regular cleaning service. Specific new protocols and standards include the following:

- Signs will be posted at multiple locations in the building explaining health precautions and hygiene procedures.

- Touch-free hand sanitizer will be available in the narthex.
- Items will be removed from the narthex and water fountains will be draped.
- Most areas of the church will be closed for the summer except for the sanctuary. This includes the nursery, fellowship hall, kitchen, and conference room/library.
- Most activities that use the fellowship hall will not take place over the summer. ESL and GED classes are finished for the spring and may be able to restart in the fall. AA is currently meeting online and have expressed a likelihood that they will continue to meet virtually over the summer. Vacation Bible School has been cancelled. Other activities and ministries that wish to use the fellowship hall and kitchen (e.g. Homeless Ministry, Adult Sunday School) should target resuming use in July, subject to ensuring that the space can be cleaned and sanitized in between uses by our contract cleaning service.
- The small seating capacity of the conference room makes it unsuitable for most uses while the Governor's Executive Order limiting attendance to 25% of maximum occupancy is still in effect. However, the space may still be used for small ad hoc meetings as needed. Church Council will therefore either use the fellowship hall or sanctuary for summer meetings, subject to ensuring that the space can be properly cleaned and sanitized by our contract cleaning service.
- Doors to the sanctuary will be kept open before and after worship services so that parishioners do not need to touch them.
- The sanctuary will be disinfected with hand wipes and cleaner between services, and during the week. This will require wiping down the tops and sides of the pews, entrance handles, and areas that people frequently touch. Current contract staff will be repurposed for this very important task.
- The sacristy and frequently handled liturgical objects (e.g. candle lighters) will also be disinfected between services by the Altar Guild.
- The Pastor will continue to wear his normal seasonal vestments, which will be cleaned by the Altar Guild per the normal cleaning schedule. Service volunteers who are normally robed (e.g. Liturgical Assistants, Acolytes)

should not wear vestments for the time being in order to avoid having to wear vestments worn by others. Vestments will be cleaned as frequently as practical.

- Trash will be disposed of between services, including the communion cups.
- Coffee and food will not yet be served after services in the fellowship hall. We recognize that this may be a big disappointment and will continue to evaluate this as the summer progresses.

Staff Training and Screening

The health protocols outlined for Houses of Worship in the Governor's Executive Order include training and screening requirements for salaried employees, hourly employees, and contract staff. Specific requirements include personal hygiene, sanitation, symptom recognition, and protocols for staying at home and returning to work for individuals who are symptomatic or test positive for the coronavirus. CTS will conduct these sessions prior to the resumption of services. A record will be maintained by the Office Administrator. Staff will self-screen prior to coming to work and prior to Sunday services. A contingency plan will be developed by the staff and Council to enable continuity of worship services and essential ministry functions in the event that any of the staff become ill or test positive for the coronavirus and have to quarantine for 14 days.

Ministries

Adult Sunday School should target resumption of in-person classes in the fellowship hall the first Sunday in July (**July 5**) in between worship services. Class layout should plan for proper social distancing between attendees seated at the various tables. Homeless Ministry should target resumption on the first Monday in July (**July 6**), conditional on being able to be perform the ministry in relative safety. A plan will be developed by the Office Administrator to clean and sanitize the fellowship hall and kitchen between these uses, as this is outside the normal cleaning schedule by our contract cleaning services (which occurs on Tuesday and Friday). Any changes to normal procedures for the Homeless Ministry will be developed by ministry leaders and discussed with participants prior to resuming activities. Other ministries such as Family Aid Ministry may continue to perform their essential services as needs dictate and conditions allow. Please contact the specific ministry leader or Pastor Jim with questions on any specific ministry.

Worship Options for Vulnerable Members

What started out as a way to continue Sunday worship during the “Stay-at-Home” order has managed to bring Christ the Servant fully into the 21st century. Our podcasts have been well received both in and far beyond our congregation, and attendance has more than matched Sunday live worship, consistently averaging 100-200 viewings per week. Given this encouragement, and in order to provide a worship option for our vulnerable members, we will live stream our Sunday worship, and also continue our podcasts for viewing online at any time during the week. This will enable vulnerable members and those who cannot attend or choose not to attend to still participate in weekly worship wherever they may be.

Which services will be live streamed is still under discussion, but we will slightly shorten the podcast to include only the Prayer of the Day, Readings, Hymn of the Day, Sermon, and Meditation. This will provide the core essence of the service (the Word spoken and preached) and enough music to support it. In-person attendees will not be filmed or seen on video. A non-scientific survey of mainline Protestant churches and other institutions (Rice University) suggests that this hybrid in-person and online combination is likely to become a common practice.

Updated Statement on the Coronavirus, June 25, 2020

Pastor Jim and the CTS Council are aware of the recent increase in COVID19 cases in Harris County, and the decision by Governor Abbott to “pause” the reopening of the Texas economy. We have carefully considered options for how to proceed over the next few weeks.

While we are concerned about the recent rise in cases, we have decided to continue with in-person worship services for those who wish to attend, with some increased safety precautions. This decision is informed by several facts. Since our reopening on Pentecost, attendance at each service has been approximately 10% of capacity, which has allowed for greater social distancing than the 6 feet recommended by the CDC. Mask use has been approximately 50% at each service. Cleaning and sanitization of the sanctuary before and between services have gone smoothly. Video alternatives (both podcasts and livestreaming) for those who have chosen to watch from home have been successful, with more than 100 unique viewings each week. We are not aware of any cases of CTS members having contracted COVID19. CTS members have risen to the task of protecting themselves and others.

We recognize that in the current environment many people will not feel safe attending in-person worship. We leave it to each individual to decide whether he or she is comfortable attending in-person worship and will certainly respect that decision. However, we also recognize the importance of the worship experience in the spiritual lives of our members and believe it is part of our mission to try to provide this if it can be done safely. Our experience over the past few weeks causes us to believe that this is the case.

Going forward, we strongly request that CTS members who choose to attend in-person services follow strict safety precautions. This means continued social distancing, washing your hands, and/or using hand sanitizer, and wearing a mask during the service (except during communion). We will continue to provide hand sanitizer and masks for those who may need them. **We would like to achieve 100% adherence to these precautions by all who attend in-person worship.** For those who choose to watch from home, we will continue to livestream our services for you to view on the internet. If you are experiencing symptoms (cough, fever, chills, etc.) we ask that you seek medical attention and stay at home until you have recovered.

The office will remain open during the week, with the same precautions for social distancing, personal hygiene, and use of masks being in effect. We have decided to push back the reopening of the Fellowship Hall until the situation in Harris County improves. This will mean deferring the restart of Homeless Ministry (in its traditional form), moving GED classes online, and continuing Adult Sunday School using Zoom meetings, which have been very successful.

We urge you to continue to pray for all who are affected by this virus.