



## Health Equity Response (H.E.R.) Task Force

Faith & Community Leaders Sub-Committee

### Reopening Best Practices for Sanctuaries and Faith-Based Organizations



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## Reopening Best Practices for Sanctuaries and Faith-Based Organizations

[www.HoustonCOVID19Recovery.org](http://www.HoustonCOVID19Recovery.org)



## CITY OF HOUSTON

Houston Health Department

**Sylvester Turner**

Mayor

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[www.houstonhealth.org](http://www.houstonhealth.org)

To: Faith and Community Leaders:

In April 2020, I formed the COVID-19 Health Equity Response (H.E.R.) Task Force in an effort to connect vulnerable and at-risk populations to necessary resources and supplies. Nearly a dozen faith leaders were appointed to serve on the Faith & Community Leaders Sub-Committee, which was charged with developing the Reopening Best Practices for Sanctuaries and Faith-Based Organizations.

Since the COVID-19 global health pandemic began, Houston's Faith Community has been an essential part of keeping Houstonians safe and informed. Our faith leaders along with the HER Task Force, have donated personal protective equipment (PPE) and provided over 1.3 million masks. They also organized and distributed food to both our residents and our neighbors in Port Arthur, Orange and Beaumont, Texas and Sulphur and Lake Charles, Louisiana after they were devastated by Hurricane Laura. All the while, these faith leaders partnered with government and health officials to transition to virtual services and modify faith practices, including weddings, memorials and funerals, in an effort to ensure the health and safety of their congregants.

As each religious institution weighs the challenging decision of when to resume or increase onsite activities, it is our hope that faith leaders refer to this guide as COVID-19 is still very present in our community. I extend my appreciation to everyone who helped to develop and distribute this essential guide to Houston's faith community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sylvester Turner".

Sylvester Turner  
Mayor

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Houston Health Department

**Sylvester Turner**

Mayor

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To: Faith and Community Leaders:

Working together, Houstonians continue to make significant progress in the battle against COVID-19.

Houston's COVID-19 positivity rate is 5.3 percent as of October 2, the lowest rate recorded. Since our city's dangerous surge in July, the number of daily newly reported cases is down and our hospitals are operating within capacity.

While the situation is improving overall, we tragically continue adding to the list of the 1,200 Houstonians who are dead because of the disease.

The reality is this virus is a threat to our health and well-being every day and will remain so for the foreseeable future. While Houstonians have the responsibility to mask up, social distance, wash hands and get tested, organizations also play a vital role in reducing the spread of disease.

That's why the guidance provided in *Reopening Best Practices for Sanctuaries and Faith-Based Organizations* is so important. The guide outlines the steps our faith community can use to mitigate risk while welcoming worshipers to our new reality.

We are better when we all do our part to stop the spread of COVID-19. Together, we can put Houston on the road to recovery. Thank you for making Houston BETTER. TOGETHER.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Stephen L. Williams in cursive.

Stephen L. Williams, MEd, MPA  
Director

Handwritten signature of David E. Persse in cursive.

David E. Persse, MD  
Local Health Authority

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## Reopening Best Practices for Sanctuaries and Faith-Based Organizations

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Dear Faith & Community Leaders,

In the first quarter of 2020, the COVID-19 global health pandemic required us to view our roles as faith and community leaders from a different perspective. Looking at both the science and spirituality, many houses of worship made the decision to close their physical doors for the overall safety and well-being of others. At the request of Mayor Sylvester Turner, the Health Equity Response (HER) Task Force was created with a sub-committee to connect faith and community leaders throughout the city of Houston. Challenged to help our fellow faith leaders while responding to the needs of the community we rallied together to serve and create a Best Practices document that would assist many in our journey to some normalcy.

This document provides as suggestions for best practices, and we urge everyone to continue to check the CDC and Houston Health Department websites and resources for up-to-date information and changes. When formulating this document, we took into consideration various denominations, worship groups and faith communities so that the uniqueness of your gathering would still offer a safe experience for all.

While we all wholeheartedly support the tradition of "separation of church and state", our city found it essential to guide us and give opportunities for community impact during this difficult season.

Thank you to all organizations, faith leaders and the entire HER Task Force Sub-Committee for working tirelessly since April 2020 to serve our community and formulate this helpful resource.

Let's continue to stay safe!

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Irishea Hilliard".

Dr. Irishea Hilliard, Senior Pastor New Light Christian Center; Chair HER Faith Leaders Task Force

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## Reopening Best Practices for Sanctuaries and Faith-Based Organizations

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### **The purpose of this document is to clearly communicate the best practices and phases of physically reopening sanctuaries and houses of worship during the current COVID-19 pandemic.**

As we gain new information, we reserve the right to modify this document at any time without notice, although we will do everything we can to properly communicate changes to all parties involved. You can visit the Health Equity Response (H.E.R.) Task Force section of [www.HoustonCOVID19Recovery.org](http://www.HoustonCOVID19Recovery.org) for the latest version of this plan.

Careful attention has been given to the federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC), State of Texas and City of Houston Health Department guidelines and recommendations. We strongly encourage you to visit those agencies' websites for additional resources that can assist you in providing a safe experience for your house of worship and communities.

As houses of worship prepare to reopen to the community, several difficult questions must be addressed before reopening.

***How can we protect our congregants, parishioners, staff, and volunteers from the coronavirus disease while in our buildings for worship or serving?***

***How do we assure the community that as leaders we are doing all we can to protect them from the disease?***

***How can we minimize the risk of disease transmission if those who are ill or those who have had contact with people who have tested positive for COVID-19 enter our facilities?***

COVID-19 is spread from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. Measures can be taken to reduce the risk of transmitting COVID-19. The use of personal protective equipment, physical barriers, masks or face coverings, and appropriate disinfectant procedures

can be put in place to help minimize the potential for exposure and spread of the virus.

#### **Key Definitions:**

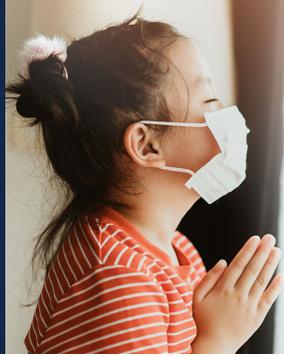
**At-Risk/Vulnerable Population:** Elderly individuals and/or those with serious underlying health conditions, including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and those whose immune system is compromised by chemotherapy or radiation treatments for cancer and other conditions requiring such therapy.

Special care should be given to those individuals who fall in the at-risk/vulnerable population by either designating an area inside the facility reserved for them, offering a service exclusively for them, or strongly encouraging them to continue to watch or participate in services remotely.

# MASK UP!



**#MaskUpHOU  
#BetterTogether**



### **Wash Your Hands Frequently**

Regularly and thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If hand washing is not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

### **Maintain Physical Distancing**

Maintain at least a distance of 6 feet between yourself and others. Also, refrain from direct physical contact with others, including hugging and shaking hands.

### **Avoid Touching Eyes, Nose and Mouth**

Your hands touch many surfaces and can pick up the virus. Once contaminated, your hands can transfer the virus to your eyes, nose, or mouth causing you to get sick. Refrain from touching your face with your hands or gloves.

### **Practice Respiratory Hygiene**

Make sure you, and the people around you, follow good respiratory hygiene and cover your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Dispose of the used tissue immediately and wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Always wear a face covering while around others.

### **Stay Home When Feeling Unwell**

If you have a fever, cough and/or difficulty breathing, make an appointment with your primary health provider or urgent care clinic to be seen and follow the directions provided by your local health authority.

### **Proper Signage & Pertinent Information**

Ensure you have proper signage throughout the campus with pertinent information on COVID-19, CDC guidelines, proper hand washing procedures, mask recommendations, new policies and procedures, and social distancing. Remind your congregants and parishioners that worshipping is an act of faith that they willingly participate in by entering the service.

### **Occupancy Adherence**

Research and follow the current occupancy guidelines established by the CDC and State to maintain full compliance with the ever-changing occupancy capabilities in accordance with the size of your facility.

### **Sanitation Guidelines**

Be sure to follow all CDC and State guidelines related to proper cleaning and disinfecting practices. It is also important to regularly clean and disinfect any frequently touched surfaces, such as doorknobs, handrails, tables, chairs, and restrooms with an EPA-approved disinfectant, following product specifications.

Make readily available hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, soap, water, or similar disinfectants.

Place readily visible signage throughout the building to remind everyone of the best hygiene practices. Also, communicate to vendors all procedures and expectations that they attest all workers are healthy and practice physical distancing and proper hygiene while on campus.

Discourage visitors during the workweek. If visitors must stop by or an alternative is not available, then employees will practice physical distancing including maintaining a distance of 6 feet, wearing a face mask, and practicing diligent hygiene. Safely limit the number of entrances and exits used for building access.

# *How can we protect our congregants, parishioners, staff, and volunteers from the coronavirus disease while in our buildings for worship or serving?*

## **Main Entrance, Common Areas, and Restrooms**

All touched surface areas at the main entrance and common areas shall be cleaned and disinfected before, between, and after events and services, including doors, door handles, handrails, tables, chairs, and hallways.

Clean the surfaces of the restroom frequently. Houses of worship shall disinfect restrooms before, during, and after services, including cleaning toilets to minimize any fecal-oral transmission.

All houses of worship should disinfect their air ducts and ventilation systems using safe-to-touch fogging spray.

## **Worship Space Sanitization**

Remove hymnals, pens, and offering envelopes, and limit or eliminate any handouts. Avoid the use of items that are not easily sanitized.

Avoid sharing any equipment used in worship. Properly clean and disinfect anything touched by or close to worship leaders including microphones, audio/video equipment, instruments, pulpits, or etc.

Disinfect all chairs, pews, floors, and surfaces with an EPA-approved disinfectant, following product specifications before and after each service.

Allow sufficient time for disinfecting products to work, per product specifications, before reentering the worship space. Consider using disinfectant systems, such as Emist, Clorox Pro, Victory, or Zogics.

## **Campus Flow Guidelines**

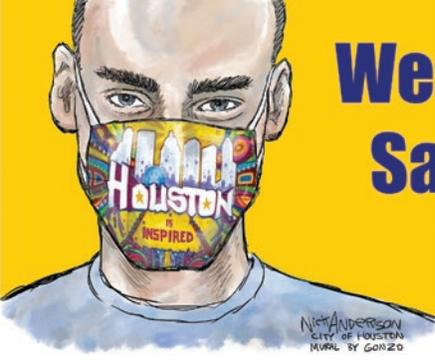
Houses of worship may find that entryways, hallways, and bathrooms present the greatest challenges to practicing social distancing when attempting to conduct on-campus services. Because worship buildings and campuses come in all shapes and sizes, there will be no one-size-fits-all solution that works for every sanctuary.

## **Staff and Volunteers**

Staff and volunteers should always wear a mask, practice social distancing, and have temperature checks. Staff and volunteers are the most susceptible to contract and spread COVID-19.



**SIMONE BILES**  
WORLD CHAMPION & OLYMPIAN



# Wear a mask. Save a life.

Nick Anderson  
CITY OF HOUSTON  
MARK BY GORZIO

#MaskUpHou

A public service message by Clear Channel Outdoor



## Parking Lots

Provide large signs that communicate basic instructions. These instructions should welcome people back to campus and encourage social distancing practices as they walk up to the building.

Consider blocking off parking spaces and utilizing parking lot volunteers to encourage social distancing before attendees enter the building.

## Entrances

Consider checking the temperature of attendees before they enter your worship building. If an attendee has a fever, ask them to watch the services at home and contact their physician.

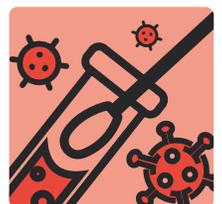
Provide signage for guiding access in and out of the worship building.

Greeters should be stationed at all entry points to welcome guests, encourage social distancing and PPE use, and answer questions for attendees. Greeters should remain more than six feet from attendees and refrain from physical contact with others.

Provide masks and hand sanitizer at each entrance. Greeters can give a pump or spray of sanitizer for each person upon entering and exiting the building. Set up a self-service hand sanitizer station at each entrance so that members and guests can follow the protocols without assistance from greeters.

Consider using separate doorways, entrances, and exits into and out of the building and worship space. Keeping attendees moving in the same direction reduces face-to-face interaction and maintains social distancing.

**BETTER.  
TOGETHER.**



# *How do we assure the community that as leaders we are doing all we can to protect them from the disease?*

## **Hallways**

Sanctuaries with narrow hallways should consider designating certain hallways as one-way. Clear signage and frequent communication of these new routes will be needed.

Sanctuaries with wide hallways should consider using dividers to reduce face to face interaction and maintain social distancing.

Block off the usage of water fountains.

Ensure that safety supplies are readily available throughout your sanctuary, such as tissues, waste receptacles, and alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

## **Bathrooms**

Limit the number of occupants in each bathroom (stalls and counters). For many smaller restrooms, the solution will be one person or family at a time.

Consider posting an usher at the entrance of each bathroom to help manage occupancy.

Clean bathroom surfaces frequently. Sanctuary staff will need to disinfect restrooms before, during, and after

services, including cleaning toilets, to minimize any fecal-oral transmission.

Provide disinfectant wipes for people to wipe down surfaces before and after use.

## **In-Service Guidelines**

Each worship venue will be different (chairs, pews, theater seating) and will have unique challenges for practicing social distancing and disinfecting between services. There will be no one-size-fits-all solution that works for every sanctuary.

## **Worship Service Planning TOP**

Determine the number and locations of services (large and well-ventilated spaces) to ensure proper social distancing and in consideration of all CDC and State guidelines.

Set the maximum occupancy for each worship service and require congregants to wear masks during services. A safe and recommended starting point for reopening is 25 percent of capacity. If exceeding the maximum occupancy is a possibility, consider pre-registration options or adding multiple overflow areas for worship spaces.

Ensure the length between services allows for proper cleaning and disinfecting of all surfaces.

Some form of social distancing could be necessary for an extended period of time or may be reinstated in the future. Make plans and invest in the resources needed to ensure the worship experience is optimal for staff, volunteers, and attendees for more than this season.

## **Entrance, Seating, and Exits**

Set up the worship space to effectively follow all CDC and State guidelines for proper spacing for social distancing. Current recommendations suggest spacing individuals or family units two spaces apart (or six feet separation) and skipping every other row.

Designate certain doorways for entrance and exit and assign volunteers to open the doors or prop doors open.

Have ushers' direct attendees to their seats or place them in sections across worship space to ensure proper social distancing

Design the exit process to ensure social distancing by directing attendees to exit by row while maintaining



six feet between individuals or family units.

Encourage attendees to move directly to cars without socializing.

**In-Service Leadership Elements**

Speaking loudly and singing creates an increased risk of exposure. Reduce the number of speakers, worship leaders, choir members, and instrumentalists to ensure proper spacing and limit the sharing of spaces or equipment.

Congregational singing far more than talking increases the risk of exposure to those nearby. Houses of worship are considering removing congregational singing, encouraging those who sing to wear a mask or increasing spacing between attendees to address this issue. Avoid elements during or after the service with close physical interactions amongst attendees like approaching the altar or sharing of objects.

Temporarily remove anything that cannot be properly sanitized between services (pens, paper, envelopes, hymnals, prayer books, etc.).

Utilize electronic media (screens or phones) to provide in-service direction. If a hand-out is needed, limit to a single page document.

If communion is to be performed, the preparation team and servers should wear fresh gloves and masks. Use individual cups; hand individual wafer to congregants; or use individually packaged communion elements. Allow for more time to provide distancing if the congregation forms a line to receive the elements.

More information is needed on the safety level of baptism, especially immersion. Consider encouraging congregants to wait for baptism or record video of baptism and play in services.

**Staff & Volunteers**

Staff and volunteers are the most susceptible to contract and transmit COVID-19. Staff and volunteers should have their temperature checked regularly, wear proper PPE, and practice social distancing.

Assess the status of current volunteers, including who is at risk and who is willing to serve. Consider conducting a survey determining the willingness

of less at-risk volunteers to step into these roles.

Provide online training with new guidelines.

Provide gloves for those who will be touching surfaces or items that will be distributed to others and/or interacting with attendees. Change gloves frequently throughout the day.

Attendee safety should be the priority of staff and volunteers. Provide wipes/disinfectants for volunteers to keep surfaces clean near them in addition to a full sanitation plan.

Consider custom branded masks to assist with identifying and protecting volunteers.

**MASK UP.  
SOCIAL DISTANCE.  
WASH HANDS.  
GET TESTED.**



# *How can we minimize the risk of disease transmission if those who are ill or those who have had contact with people who have tested positive for COVID-19 enter our facilities?*

## **Office Guidelines**

The goal of the Faith & Community Leaders Sub-Committee is to develop questions and ideas to consider as each house of worship develops a general strategy to safely reopen offices and bring staff back onto our respective campuses.

We recommend that each house of worship considers the following:

Follow CDC's (and other government agency) guidelines whenever possible.

What expectations should the staff have of their employer in regard to creating and maintaining a reasonably "safe" and healthy work environment?

What expectations should the employer have of their staff in regard to supporting the employer's efforts to maintain a reasonably "safe" and healthy work environment?

Will the employer want to define guidelines and expectations in a document to be formally provided to (and acknowledged by) each employee before they return to work?

What sanitation/hygiene materials should the employer plan to provide?

Materials such as:

- Disposable masks and gloves
- Hand sanitizer, both in common areas and at desktops
- Sanitizing wipes, both in common areas and at desktops
- Thermometers

What hygiene and safety guidelines will staff, visitors, and congregants be required to follow?

What specific planning actions should the employer undertake to ensure a reasonably safe work environment?

Actions such as:

- Determining the proper density of staff office areas, considering your particular office environment
- Deciding if the sanctuary will allow free access to buildings by the general public, or by appointment only
- Evaluating if protective shields or other measures should be taken at reception desks, welcome counters, etc.
- Deciding if staff schedules are to be formalized and published
- Maintaining a sign-in/sign-out system

## **Children & Teen Service Guidelines**

Each worship venue will be different concerning the care for children and teens and will have unique challenges for practicing social distancing and disinfecting. There will be no one-size-fits-all solution that works for every house of worship, but here are some best practices.

Careful consideration will be given to follow guidance from independent school districts in our communities in regard to in-person kids services and facility closures during the summer and school year.

All toys and games to be cleaned and sanitized by hand before, between, and after services.

All kids' classrooms to be disinfected using safe-to-touch disinfectant (fogging) spray.

Sanitizer stations should be installed in kids' classrooms and hallways.

Maintain classroom size in accordance with CDC and State guidelines.



*"The City of Houston and our partners have taken innovative steps to monitor the spread of the coronavirus, so that we are better prepared to provide resources to communities that are vulnerable and high-risk."*

- Mayor Sylvester Turner

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**Additional Resources are provided by the following organizations:**

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Guidance for When to Reopen Workplaces  
CDC Interim Guidance for Employers
- Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19
- The State of Texas and Texas Workforce Commission Resources for Employers
- Texas Department of State Health Services Checklists for Office-based Employers and Staff members
- Greater Houston Partnership Principles to Guide Reopening
- Free Resources to Help Churches and Ministries Reopen
- Humanitarian Disaster Institute Free Reopening Guide
- Free Webinar: How and When to Reopen - Humanitarian Disaster Institute

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Contributing Churches, Leaders, and Organizations

**H.E.R. TASK FORCE Faith and Community Leaders**

Director Janice Weaver, Mayor's Office - City of Houston; City Lead

Dr. Irishea Hilliard, Senior Pastor New Light Christian Center; Chair

Bishop Shelton Bady, Harvest Time Church

Cynthia N. Colbert, President/CEO - Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston

Bishop James Dixon, Community of Faith Church

Rev. S.J. Gilbert II, Mt. Sinai Baptist Church

Rev. Gregory Han, Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston

Kimberly Hatter, Mayor's Office Program Manager for Bloomberg Associates

Dr. Max A. Miller Jr., Mt. Hebron Missionary Baptist Church

Angelica Ortega, National Association of Christian Churches

Rev. Michael Pender, Fallbrook Church

Rev. Rudy Rasmus, St. John's Church Downtown

Rev. Byron Stevenson, The Fort Bend Church

Director Juliet Stipeche, Mayor's Office of Education - City of Houston

Pastor Rodrigo Vargas, Lead Pastor of Union Houston

Ernest Walker, General Manager, KTSU 90.9 Radio Station

Rev. Steve Wells, South Main Baptist Church

**Bloomberg Associates**

visit [www.HoustonCOVID19Recovery.org](http://www.HoustonCOVID19Recovery.org) for Mask Up! campaign collateral.





# Better. Together.

**MASK UP. SOCIAL DISTANCE.  
WASH HANDS. GET TESTED.**

For testing near you call **832-393-4220**.

Visit **HOUSTONHEALTH.ORG**

