St. Anne’s Episcopal Church

**Coronavirus Reopen Plan**

Update: July 16, 2020

(Original: June 15, 2020)

**Background**

**Emergence of Coronavirus**

The year 2020 will be remembered for many things, perhaps most notably the spread of a new novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19. The virus that was first detected in Wuhan, China in late 2019 set off a global pandemic.

Community transmission of COVID-19 was first detected in the United States in February 2020. By mid-March, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories had reported cases of COVID-19.

Here are some key dates in the spread of the coronavirus:

* March 8, 2020: St. Anne’s held its last in-person group worship service before closing the church to comply with Diocesan and state safety recommendations.
* March 10, 2020: N.C. Governor Roy Cooper implemented the state’s coronavirus COVID-19 preparedness plan and issued an executive order declaring a state of emergency.
* March 11, 2020: COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO).
* March 13, 2020: A national emergency was declared in the United States concerning the COVID-19 outbreak.
* March 30, 2020: North Carolina issued a state-wide Stay-at-Home order.
* Friday, May 22, 2020: North Carolina began lifting the governor’s Stay-at-Home order and entered Phase II to reopen the state.
* July 14, 2020: NC Gov. Roy Cooper extended Phase 2 of reopening for three more weeks.
* End of July 2020: According to the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, this is the earliest possible date churches can reopen for administrative functions and church services, a date that may get pushed back based on trends.
* [TBD]: The state is expected to enter Phase III of reopening, unless it is changed or cancelled.

The coronavirus did not come with an instruction book forcing all organizations, businesses and other affected entities, including churches, to find their own ways forward to prevent the spread of the virus within their organizations and communities.

**Response of The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina**

From the start of the coronavirus crisis, the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina has been responsive and proactive.

In early March 2020, the leadership team of the Diocese started tracking the spread of COVID-19 in consultation with national and state health and government experts and issued initial guidance for clergy to implement within their faith communities as they saw fit. But the coronavirus was fast-moving and continued to spread.

Sensing an increasingly urgent need to stay in touch and communicate regularly with clergy and laity, the bishops of the Diocese of North Carolina, The Rt. Rev. Sam Rodman and The Rt. Rev. Anne Hodges-Copple, set up twice-a-week video calls on Tuesday and Thursday mornings starting Thursday, March 12, 2020. The goal of the calls was to provide a forum where church leaders could ask questions as well as share insights, experiences and ideas as more was learned about the virus, how and where it was spreading, and appropriate responses.

As it became clear that the spread of coronavirus was accelerating, the bishops, in consultation with the national church and a team of state and local public health experts developed restrictive guidelines around how to worship safely. The restrictions required that all churches close their doors and move to virtual worship with limitations. The Diocese communicated limitations related to liturgical considerations around celebration of the Eucharist, sermon delivery as well as the number of people who could be safely present for the recording and/or livestreaming of services and service music.

St. Anne’s complied with the new guidelines and closed the church. The last day of group worship at St. Anne’s was Sunday, March 8, 2020.

Over the next four months, the bishops with help from the and Diocesan leadership team prayerfully listened to experts; followed science, trends and common sense; and researched how other dioceses in the region were handling adjustments that needed to be made to services, formation, pastoral care, building and facility maintenance, among many other considerations. This hard work resulted in the preparation of a document designed to provide clergy and laity with a blueprint for how to operate during closure while laying the groundwork for reopening and providing guidance on what group worship would need to look like when it was safe to again gather in-person for services.

***A Four Stage Reopen Plan***

On May 20, 2020, the Diocese issued a document called “[A Time of Challenge and Change: A Plan for Churches during a Pandemic](https://www.episdionc.org/uploads/images/a-time-of-challenge-and-change-may-20-2020-edition_698.pdf)” designed as a living resource for churches across the Diocese to refer to on how to operate in this extraordinary time. The content of this document will no doubt change as more is learned about coronavirus and its spread and directives from the national church evolve.

As of this writing, Bishops Sam and Anne have established the end of July 2020 as the earliest possible reopen date for churches in the Diocese. Given current upward trends in North Carolina, the Diocese, operating conservatively and out of an abundance of caution, may move that date back again. It is important to note that the timeframe for reopening churches within the Diocese does not necessarily follow the timeline for reopening the state of North Carolina. Our bishops are clear that the choices and decisions the Diocese makes and recommends may differ from governmental directives.

The Diocese recognizes that the timetable for reopening may differ from church-to-church based on the demographics, desires, preferences and needs of each parish and congregation. In addition, there is an understanding that processes and procedures will likely change going forward based on new information as it becomes available.

To prepare for reopening, the bishops asked churches to develop their own preliminary reopen plans by June 15, 2020, based on guidance contained in “A Time of Challenge and Change.”

**St. Anne’s Response**

St. Anne’s, with the strong leadership of its rector, The Rev. Ginny Wilder, was kept informed of Diocesan directives related to the coronavirus pandemic starting in early 2020. Following the closing of the church and the introduction of virtual services through Zoom and Facebook Live on March 15, 2020, the Vestry started meeting weekly by Zoom for check-ins and updates in addition to regularly scheduled monthly meetings. Vestry members have been calling parishioners regularly since March 2020 to stay in touch and help alleviate the social isolation brought on by the statewide shutdown.

Taking into consideration guidance from the Diocese, local and state trends, an understanding of the demographics of St. Anne’s parishioners, and the desire to keep church members safe, the Vestry has been conservative in establishing a reopen date for St. Anne’s, which as of this writing will be no earlier than mid-August 2020.

Given all the information with which the Vestry was working, it became fairly clear early on that the continuation of virtual worship would need to become a part of St. Anne’s reopen plan in addition to group worship options. A Vestry member was assigned to head a technology committee whose goal it was to explore technology needs and equipment purchases in order to facilitate the availability of quality online service options.

As a way to begin communicating with parishioners about what the reopening of St. Anne’s will look like, an all-parish Zoom meeting was held following the 10 am service on Sunday, May 31, 2020. During that meeting, Vestry members took turns sharing information about how group worship will work initially in the age of coronavirus, Parishioners asked questions in the chat box in what was an engaging, informative and illuminating discussion for which the Vestry received high praise.

Later that same week, on Thursday, June 4, 2020, an online survey was emailed to parishioners exploring their personal preferences and current thinking around returning to group worship. That valuable input, provided by 85 parishioners, was carefully considered and incorporated into the changes St. Anne’s has made to its services as it considers reopening its doors while incorporating new forms of technology into worship in the age of coronavirus. An executive summary of the survey was emailed to parishioners on July 8, 2020.

What follows is St. Anne’s Reopen Plan, a living, breathing document designed to change as new information becomes available.

The St. Anne’s Plan will follow the Diocesan Four-Stage Plan, bearing in mind these overall guidelines and assuming that anyone participating in group worship will practice masking, social distancing and appropriate sanitation protocols:

* Phase I: *Public Health Indicators (PHI)—Rates of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths are rising*
  + Phase 1a: Church remains closed, virtual services and meeting only are available
  + Phase 1 b: Outdoor services allowed for up to 25 people, including altar party; virtual services and meetings continue. No childcare available.
* Phase 2: *PHI—Rates of cases, hospitalizations and deaths are declining. Testing and tracing are available. Sufficient PPE is available.*
  + Indoor services allowed for up to 25 people, and outdoor services expanded to include up to 35 people; virtual services and meetings continue. No childcare available.
* Phase 3: *PHI—Case, hospitalization and deaths have decreased consistently for at least 14 days and are near zero. Widespread testing and tracing are available. Health care systems have the capacity to manage all in need.*
  + Indoor services can be held for up to 50 people; virtual services and meetings continue. Childcare available.
* Phase 4: *PHI—A vaccine is available to the general public. Treatment of proven effectiveness is widely available, as is widespread testing for the virus. Widespread immunity is present in the community.*
  + No limit to the number of worshipers who may attend worship and other activities, except for those known to be infectious, are actively sick or who display any of the symptoms of being ill; virtual services and meetings continue. Childcare available.

**St. Anne’s Coronavirus Reopen Plan**

**Cleaning, Sanitizing and Other Building Maintenance Protocols**

When St. Anne’s closed in March 2020, the Vestry made the decision to have our sextons, Wilson Commercial Cleaning, continue to clean and sanitize the building twice a week. In addition, we asked Wilson to deep clean each section of the church on a rotating basis. The Vestry agreed that maintaining the cleanliness of the building while it was closed would make it easier to prepare the building for reopening when the time came.

In addition, the Buildings & Grounds Committee organized a group of volunteers who, with a checklist in hand, walked through the building and around the grounds several times a week to make sure there were no problems with things like the HVAC system, plumbing/piping, doors, windows, and the grounds. Daily reports are being sent to the parish administrator who is logging them.

Here is how St. Anne’s will prepare and maintain the worship and administrative spaces once the church reopens.

**Prior to Reopening**

* Once a reopen date has been confirmed, Wilson Commercial Cleaning will go through the entire church to clean and sanitize it.
* St. Anne’s will follow current health and safety protocols, including using masks at all gatherings, posting signs indicating symptoms, safe mask-wearing and hand-washing protocols, urging people to stay home and seek medical attention if they have symptoms, and recommending prescreening at home.
* Hand sanitizer stations will be placed throughout the worship and administrative areas.
* We will maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels for drying hands in the rest rooms and kitchen.
* Rest room entrance doors will be propped open to minimize high-surface contact with the doors.
* In the women’s restroom, only the two handicap-accessible will be available for use—the other stalls will be closed off. In the men’s restroom, only the stall will be available. Signage will be posted indicating that only one person—or one family unit—may enter each rest room at a time.
* Trash cans will be placed near entrance/exit doors to the rest rooms.
* If worship takes place in the nave only (not Parish Hall), signage will direct parishioners to remain in the Sanctuary and Nave spaces, practicing safe social distancing.
* A small group of volunteers practicing safety protocols will collect and store all BCPs and hymnals in a designated place to limit high-touch contact with these surfaces.
* A small group of volunteers will remove and store chairs from the Nave and place remaining chairs around the Sanctuary to maintain at least 6 feet of safe social distancing.
* **[Other]**

**Once the Church Reopens**

* Wilson Commercial Cleaning will deep clean and sanitize the Nave, Narthex, restroom areas and Parish Hall following each Sunday service. Wilson will continue to clean all other unused parts of the church on a rotating basis.
* If more than one service is held each Sunday, a group of properly trained volunteers will clean and sanitize common spaces, especially high-touch surfaces, between services.
* On Sundays, parishioners will be directed to enter the church through the Narthex door on Fairlawn Dr., which will be propped open (weather permitting) to minimize high-surface contact.
* On Sundays, only the altar party will be allowed to enter the back door and enter the Parish Hall in order to robe for services.
* The two exit doors in the Nave will be propped open during each service to allow for proper air flow (weather permitting). The fire doors in the Narthex will be propped open as well as the two doors leading from the restroom area and the two doors leading into the Nave from the Narthex.
* If/when outdoor services are held, a small group of volunteers will move and set up all needed items—such as tents, altar table, candles—outside and return all items to the church following the end of the service, clearly identifying for Wilson Commercial Cleaning what items need to be cleaned and sanitized.
* For outside services, parishioners must bring their own chairs. When setting up chairs, appropriate physical distancing must be applied to chair placement.
* The water cooler in the Parish Hall will be available during services. Note: Only disposable cups may be used. Parishioners may not use the cooler to refill personal water containers.
* Microphones used during services or in the recording of portions of services in church spaces should be sanitized after each use per manufacturers’ instructions.
* Church offices can reopen provided large enough spaces are established for physical distancing to be maintained, with the requirement that proper sanitation measures be strictly adhered to and enforced, and with proper ventilation. The church administrator and rector should limit the number of people who gather, discourage visitors, make sure everybody who enters the space wears a mask, and ensure that all surfaces, including the phones, are regularly sanitized.
* St. Anne’s may allow small groups to begin meeting in the church again, such as EFM, Shape Note singers, Tai Chi, formation classes, following social distancing guidelines, once the Diocese moves into Phase 3.
* **[Other]**

**New Worship Protocols**

The age of coronavirus is bringing with it new normals, challenging all to move out of their comfort zones and adapt to new realities. Nowhere is this more evident than in the recommended changes to church services. It is important to remind parishioners that these protocols are designed to serve as acts of love for their neighbors as well as themselves in order to minimize the spread of coronavirus.

Below is an outline, based on current understandings, of new protocols for conducting worship for the foreseeable future.

***Preparing for Worship***

* The Diocese permits the recording of worship from inside St. Anne’s provided appropriate physical distancing (6 feet or more) for non-family members in the same space and advising all participants to wear masks, regardless of their distance from each other.
* All sung music must be prerecorded.
* Organists and pianists may participate in live worship services. They may also accompany a soloist during a prerecorded segment of music, if the organist wears a mask and remains 20 feet from the soloist. Wind instruments are prohibited. If there is an instrumentalist present with the soloist, a camera operator may not be present, and the camera should be unattended during the piece. After the filming is concluded, no one else may enter the recording space for 30 minutes in order to give any droplets time to dissipate.
* Links to prerecorded portions of services must be sent to the rector or a member of the Technology Committee in a timely way.
* For in-person worship, flower delivery and the work of the altar guild should be organized to observe physical distancing and protective protocols.
* All holy water stoops and baptismal fonts will be drained and sanitized.

***Arriving for In-Person Worship***

* Based on current guidelines, a maximum of 25 people practicing safe social distancing, including the altar party, can be in the same indoor space at the same time for worship, once indoor worship is approved by the Diocese and St. Anne’s is comfortable offering indoor services again.
* A maximum of 35 people practicing safe mask-wearing and safe social distancing, including the altar party, can participate in outdoor services. In order to plan for services, St. Anne’s asks parishioners to sign up in advance for each service on a first-come, first-served basis so no one will get turned away at the door.
* Parishioners need to enter the church through the Narthex door facing Fairlawn Drive staying 6 feet apart.
* Parishioners must bring and wear their own cloth masks to each service, both indoors and outdoors or they will not be permitted to participate in service. St. Anne’s will have a limited number of masks to offer parishioners who do not arrive with their own.
* Upon arrival at St. Anne’s, parishioners will be screened for coronavirus symptoms, including temperature checks with infrared thermometers. All will be signed in at the door by a greeter. Records of who is in attendance for each service will be used for purposes of contact tracing by health authorities in case someone attends a service who later tests positive for COVID-19.
* Following check-in, parishioners will be asked to take a seat in one of the designated chairs in the sanctuary, practicing safe social distancing at all times.
* If arriving for an outdoor service, parishioners must bring their own chairs. St. Anne’s will not provide any seating.
* Masks must be worn throughout the service, with parishioners slipping the host under their masks during communion after receiving the host in their hand from the celebrant.
* Printed bulletins will not be available at St. Anne’s to minimize multiple touches. Parishioners are invited to print off copies of weekly bulletins at home and bring them to the service. St. Anne’s asks that parishioners take personal responsibility for disposing of printed bulletins following each service.
* BCPs will not be available at St. Anne’s to minimize multiple touches. Parishioners are invited to bring their own copies to BCPs to services.

***Protocols for In-Person Worship***

As of this writing, the Diocese has provided churches with guidelines for virtual and in-person protocols as outlined below.

* Incorporating the purchase of new technologies, virtual worship will continue to be an option through St. Anne’s to accommodate vulnerable populations and a larger worshipping community, which includes those who will not feel comfortable returning to group worship until there is a vaccine for COVID-19.
* Based on feedback obtained from an electronic survey that was emailed to all parishioners in early June for whom email addresses were available, St. Anne’s will, at least initially, offer the following weekly services, a combination of virtual, livestreaming and in-person options. Details for accessing each service will be included in Weekly Announcements.
  + **[Insert list of those services once confirmed]**
* Initially, up to three members of an altar party may participate in each service—the celebrant, deacon and one server. The Music Director and organist will also be present at each service. Up to 20 parishioners can be present for indoor services.
* Acolytes and other servers should observe physical distancing and protective protocols.
* The sharing of microphones during live servers is discouraged.
* When arriving at church, parishioners will be reminded by the greeter to maintain social distancing and be directed to sit in chairs that have been appropriately spaced in the sanctuary for safe social distancing. Members of the same household may sit together.
* Before entering the church, parishioners, including the altar party, must wear face masks appropriately throughout the entire service, except for when receiving the host during communion.
* NO BCPS or hymnals will be available during group worship at this time to reduce high-surface contact.
* An organist and/or pianist may participate in live worship services provided they are at least 6 feet from members of the altar party as well as parishioners. When soloists are finally allowed to participate in indoor services, they must be 20 feet away from the pianist/organist and members of the altar party.
* Congregational singing and choir singing are strictly prohibited as are wind instruments for up to two years until a vaccine is available.
* Physical contact is not permitted during the passing of the peace. Parishioners should find alternative ways of greeting each other from a distance, again maintaining safe distancing.
* An offertory basket will not be passed during services. Rather, it will be placed in a central location for the collection of offerings. Alternately, parishioners can make donations online through the St. Anne’s website.
* At least one Vestry member will be asked to attend each group worship service to be available as a resource and to handle money-counting responsibilities.
* During communion, parishioners will receive communion of one kind. Hosts will be distributed according to current Diocesan guidelines with parishioners practicing safe social distancing and masking guidelines.
* For now, healing stations will not be available during communion on first Sundays of the month.
* Following the service, the rector and altar party will not be available to greet service participants at the back of the church. Parishioners are asked not to linger but to go directly to their cars.

**Conclusion**

The guidelines outlined in this Reopen Plan for St. Anne’s are subject to change as information and knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic change, requiring new and different responses. This document will continue to be updated to reflect new recommended protocols designed to keep the members of St. Anne’s safe and connected to our special worship community.