

Celebrations and Seasons: Holy Week and Easter 2021



THE ECUMENICAL CONSULTATION
ON PROTOCOLS FOR
WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, AND SACRAMENTS

Celebrations and Seasons: Holy Week and Easter 2021

Introduction

As we are writing these materials (in February 2021), the number of new daily cases of COVID-19 in the United States has only begun to decrease while deaths continue to climb.

Our work relies on sound public health guidance to call Christians to responsible decisions about gathering and safe practices when they gather.

We always recommend that state, local, and denominational guidance be considered.

Recent guidance from the CDC about mutations in the coronavirus continue to lead us to call for **increased caution**:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/transmission/variant.html>.

Indoor Gatherings

Limited indoor gatherings with persons outside one's own household may be relatively safe if **all three of these conditions can be met**:

- Fewer than 5% of the people in your county/region who are tested test positive as reported on <https://www.covidactnow.org>
- The rate of new cases per day in your county/region is less than 10 in 100,000.
- ICU beds are filled to less than 70% of capacity in your region as reported on state or county health department websites.

Outdoor Gatherings

Limited outdoor gatherings with persons outside one's own household may be relatively safe if **all three of these conditions can be met**:

- Fewer than 10% of the people in your county/region who are tested test positive as reported on <https://www.covidactnow.org>
- The rate of new cases per day in your county/region is less than 20 in 100,000.
- ICU beds are filled to less than 80% of capacity in your region as reported on state department of health websites.

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All guidance we provide assumes that all participants:

- Wear a mask fully covering their mouth and nose at all times, and when indoors wear two masks.
- Maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from all persons not living in their household
- Have no symptoms of COVID-19
- Have not knowingly been exposed to persons who have tested positive for COVID-19 or have had any symptoms of COVID-19 within the past two weeks
- Refrain from congregational singing when indoors
- Will demonstrate principles of inclusivity and just treatment of all persons as they gather.

Palm / Passion Sunday

Principles

The core purposes of Palm / Passion Sunday:

- To remember the procession of Jesus into Jerusalem on the first day of Holy Week
- To hear the story of the passion of Jesus from the synoptic gospels (in 2021, Mark's gospel)

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Practices

1. The core actions of this day listed above can be practiced by households provided that adequate resources are provided for home use and that persons or households commit to use them during this day.
2. If local conditions permit in-person gatherings, one or more brief services (no longer than 30 minutes) may be offered over the course of the day.
3. We recommend the entire service be held outdoors (procession, reading, and Eucharist).

We recommend spacing additional outdoor services by at least one hour after the conclusion of a previous service to allow for cleaning and natural air replacement.

If weather conditions **require** the reading of the Passion and the Eucharist to be held indoors, we recommend spacing additional services by several hours after the conclusion of a previous service to allow time for cleaning and three complete air replacements between services.

4. We recommend that palms or palm crosses be sent by mail or placed ahead of time with worship guides on outdoor seating. People may also be encouraged to cut a small leafy branch for their own use.
5. A small ensemble, masked and at least 16 feet apart, from anyone else, may sing an appropriate song or anthem during the processional (Liturgy of the Palms).
6. For the reading of the passion:
 - If indoors: We do not recommend that the passion be chanted. One or more readers may read the passion, with no congregational responses.
 - If outdoors: The gospel may be chanted, with the cantor or ensemble at least 16 feet away from others and masked. There may be limited congregational responses, spoken at a low volume.

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7. For the Eucharist (Holy Communion):

If indoors: We recommend distribution in one kind only and in silence to limit time and exposure.

If outdoors: Distribution may be offered in both kinds in silence, following our [standard guidance](#) (pp. 20 ff).

Maundy Thursday

Principles

The core purposes of Maundy Thursday (Holy Thursday) include:

- To embody acts of personal service and mutual love, such as footwashing
- To receive and restore penitents to the fellowship of the church
- To hear and reflect on the New Commandment of Jesus and his last supper with his disciples, as recorded by John's gospel
- In some traditions, to reflect on the institution of the Eucharist (Holy Communion)
- To "strip" the worship space in preparation for Good Friday (Holy Friday) and Holy Saturday.

Practices

1. The core actions of this day listed above can all be practiced within households provided that adequate resources are provided for home use and that persons or households commit to use them during Maundy Thursday.

2. If local conditions permit in-person gatherings, one or more brief services (no longer than 30 minutes total) may be offered over the course of the day.

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If services are held indoors, we recommend spacing them by several hours to allow time for cleaning and three complete air replacements between services.

If services are held outdoors, we recommend spacing them by at least one hour to allow for cleaning and natural air replacement.

3. We recommend that acts of foot washing when part of an in-person gathering be limited to persons in the same household and be held outdoors. Households should bring their own basins and towels.

4. We do not recommend tactile acts such as anointing or “the right hand of fellowship” be included in any acts of receiving or restoring persons to membership or fellowship at this time. Instead, we recommend that church members be invited to offer their own individual expressions of welcome and restoration through mail, email, or social media.

5. While some congregations are used to having a fellowship meal on Maundy Thursday, we do not *encourage* this practice during the pandemic. If the congregation does have a fellowship meal, it should be held outdoors. Tables should be distanced at least 12 feet apart to allow for access and egress, and seating should be limited to one household per table. Persons may bring their own simple meal, or a prepackaged simple meal may be distributed to each table.

6. In traditions where commemorating the institution of the Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper) has been important, we recommend the reading of the Epistle and a brief homily instead of the Eucharist if safety precludes celebrating the sacrament.

7. We recommend that only members of the same household strip the worship space and that provision be made for others to view this part of the service remotely or online rather than in the worship space.

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Good Friday

Principles

The core purposes of Good Friday (Holy Friday) include:

- To hear and reflect on the story of the execution of Jesus as presented by John
- To pray for the church and the world, including prayers for justice
- To acknowledge our complicity in the execution of Jesus

Practices

1. The core actions of this day can all be practiced within households provided that adequate resources are provided for home use and that persons or households commit to use them during Good Friday.

2. These core actions may normally have been accomplished through multiple services and multiple kinds of services held throughout the day. These include a “standard” Noon service, Seven Last Words services, Tenebrae, and stations of the cross, among others. Some of these services may normally have lasted for several hours. In some communities, it is customary for there to be one or more ecumenical community-wide gatherings. **We do not recommend *indoor* gatherings of persons from multiple congregations at this time.**

3. If local conditions permit in-person gatherings, one or more brief services (no longer than 30 minutes total) may be offered over the course of the day.

If services are held **indoors**, we recommend spacing them by several hours to allow time for cleaning and three complete air replacements between services.

If services are held **outdoors**, we recommend spacing them by at least one hour to allow for cleaning and natural air replacement.

4. If the Passion is to be chanted we recommend that the service be held outdoors to diminish threat from accumulating aerosols caused by extended singing.

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5. If the service is held indoors, we recommend using non-verbal, bodily responses (such as American Sign Language, or a simple bow) instead of verbal responses to the intercessions.

6. In-person gatherings should not exceed 30 minutes. If the planned service exceeds 30 minutes, we recommend producing the service by other means and providing ways for others to view it remotely (outdoors) or online.

7. Devotional practices that involve kissing the cross or touching it are not recommended at this time.

8. We recommend that practices of the stations of the cross take place outdoors, especially if any indoor gatherings are planned for the day or evening.

The Great Vigil of Easter

Principles

1. The Easter Vigil has become important for many congregations that observe a full set of services over the three days (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter). It is particularly important for congregations that maintain a catechumenal process, such as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), since the Great Vigil is when that process culminates in baptism.
2. The Easter Vigil is by nature a long ritual event consisting of four distinct movements, or services:
 - The Service of Light
 - The Service of the Word
 - The Service of the Baptismal Covenant
 - The Service of the Table

One can locate liturgical texts, rubrics, and propers for the Easter Vigil in many denominational ritual books, and we refer the reader to them.¹

3. The Vigil as a whole embodies a spirit of “being on watch” with a deliberate, unhurried pace through these four movements.

¹ For example, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1979), 285-95. *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 368-76. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leaders Desk Edition* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2006), 643-653.

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1. We recommend holding the Service of Light and the Service of the Word online, beginning after sunset on Holy Saturday. These first two movements could be done in an unhurried manner, with no time limitations and could include such elements as “congregational” or (virtual) choir singing which may not be possible in an in-person gathering.² The assembly may reconvene in an *outdoor* location for the Service of the Baptismal Covenant and the Eucharist, with this part of the liturgy beginning shortly before sunrise. If well planned, it should be possible to celebrate these final two services within the recommended thirty minutes.
2. The continuity of the Easter Vigil could be maintained by appointing representative members of the assembly to remain in prayer between the end of the Service of the Word and the beginning of the Service of the Baptismal Covenant.³
3. Baptisms may be administered following the [guidance offered in the earlier work of this consultation](#), p. 23 ff. Particular attention may be paid to baptismal vows calling baptismal candidates and those reaffirming their vows to lives of justice and inclusion and to work against injustice and exclusion.
4. As an act of baptismal reaffirmation, the presider may repeat the appropriate words of remembrance while scooping water and letting it pour back into the font.
5. Eucharist may be celebrated following [our previous guidance](#), p. 20 ff.
6. We commend [our careful practices](#) for extending communion to the unwillingly absent (p. 29 ff).

² For an example of such a service, see the leaders’ guide for “The Great Vigil of Easter Celebrated by The Order of Saint Luke through the medium of Zoom,” April 11, 2020.

³ Leadership, clergy and lay, could be organized to cover half-hour periods and other members of the assembly could participate with them in this online prayer. Various forms could be appointed for use during this part of the Vigil, including other readings from scripture, collects and intercessory prayers. A recitation of the Psalter might be considered.

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Easter Sunday

Principles

The core purposes of Easter Sunday:

- To remember and rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus Christ
- To celebrate the sacrament of baptism and/or reaffirmation of baptism
- To celebrate the Eucharist (Holy Communion)

Practices

1. Celebration of the resurrection may be held within households. The celebration of the sacraments requires some physical gathering.
2. If local conditions permit in-person gatherings, several brief services (no longer than 30 minutes) may be offered over the course of the day, beginning with the conclusion of the Great Vigil (baptism and Eucharist) at or near sunrise or a sunrise service.
3. **We recommend the entire service be held outdoors** (celebration, baptisms, and Eucharist).

We recommend spacing additional outdoor services by at least one hour after the conclusion of a previous service to allow for cleaning and natural air replacement.

If weather conditions **require** baptism and/or or Eucharist to be held indoors, we recommend spacing additional services by several hours after the conclusion of a previous service to allow time for cleaning and three complete air replacements between services.

4. If outdoors, a small ensemble, masked and spaced at least 16 feet apart, may sing an appropriate song celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. A wind ensemble, spaced 16 feet from all others, may also play if desired.

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If indoors, we recommend limiting singing to a soloist, masked and 16 feet away from anyone else. We do not recommend using wind instruments indoors.

5. For the reading of the gospel:

If indoors: We do not recommend that the gospel be chanted.

If outdoors: The gospel may be chanted, with the cantor at least 16 feet away from others and masked.

6. For baptism:

We recommend following our [previous guidance](#) (pp. 23ff). Particular attention may be paid to baptismal vows calling baptismal candidates and those reaffirming their vows to lives of justice and inclusion and to work against injustice and exclusion.

7. For baptismal reaffirmation:

If indoors, we recommend non-verbal responses.

If outdoors, verbal responses may be offered at a low volume.

Indoors or outdoors, the font is used only by the presider.

8. For the Eucharist (Holy Communion):

If indoors:

We do not recommend that the Great Thanksgiving be chanted or that congregational responses be spoken.

We recommend the distribution one kind only and silence at the distribution to limit time and exposure.

If outdoors: The Great Thanksgiving may be chanted if desired, and responses spoken by the congregation at a low volume. Distribution may be offered in both kinds in silence, following our [previous guidance](#) (pp. 20 ff).

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The Consultation includes:

CONVENERS

The Rev. Taylor W. Burton Edwards, Pastor and Consultant, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Larry Goodpaster, Bishop-in-Residence, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

The Rev. Dr. L. Edward Phillips, Associate Professor of Worship and Liturgical Theology, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

Dr. Amos Nascimento, Director of Global Education and New Initiatives, The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church

CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS

Deacon Jennifer Baker-Trinity, Program Director for Resource Development, Augsburg Fortress and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Linda Bell, Retired Pastor; Former President, African Descent Lutheran Association of the Metropolitan New York Synod; D.Min student, United Lutheran Seminary

John Blevins, Associate Research Professor, Director of the Interfaith Health Program and Director of Social-Behavioral Sciences, Child Health and Mortality Prevention Surveillance Network, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University

Dr. Erica Bjornstad, Assistant Professor, Division of Pediatric Nephrology, The University of Alabama at Birmingham and Pediatric Nephrologist, Children's of Alabama.

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Dr. Mary Jane Burton, Medical Director, Viral Hepatitis Clinics, G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery Medical Center, VA Medical Center, Jackson, Mississippi

The Rev. April Casperson, Director of Diversity and Inclusion for the West Ohio Conference of The United Methodist Church

The Rt. Rev. Brian Cole, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of East Tennessee

The Rev. Lisa Garvin, Chaplain and Minister to the University, Southern Methodist University; United Methodist Board of Church and Society, Advocacy Chair

Melanie C. Gordon, Director of Diversity and Inclusion and Religion and Ethics Instructor, Christ Church Episcopal School, Greenville, South Carolina; Executive Director, Do-LOVE-Walk Children's Ministry Consultants

The Rev. Dr. David Gambrell, Director of the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church, USA.

The Rev. Ben Gosden, Senior Pastor, Trinity United Methodist Church, Savannah, Georgia

Brian Hehn, Director of The Center for Congregational Song, The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada

Dr. Mimi Kiser, Assistant Professor Research Track, Interfaith Health Program, Hubert Department of Global Health and Exec. Committee Religion and Public Health Collaborative, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University

Dr. Mary Love, Administrative Secretary to the Pan Methodist Commission, and Adjunct Professor of Christian Education, Hood Theological Seminary

The Rev. Chris McAlilly, Pastor, Oxford University United Methodist Church, Oxford, Mississippi

Dr. Marcia McFee, Worship Design Studio and Professor of Worship, San Francisco Theological Seminary

The Rev. Dr. W. Douglas Mills, Pastor, Mountainside UMC, Cedar Crest, New Mexico, former Ecumenical Staff Officer, The United Methodist Church

The Rev. Dr. Bruce T. Morrill, SJ, Edward A. Malloy Chair of Catholic Studies in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University

Celebrations and Seasons: Holy Week and Easter 2021

The Rev. Hyemin Na, Ph.D. candidate, Emory University

Dr. Richard A. "Ran" Nisbett, MSPH (retired), Moderator, Iona Community
Common Concern Network for the Whole Creation

Dr. Diana Sanchez-Bushong, Director of Music Ministries, Discipleship
Ministries, The United Methodist Church

The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Stamm, Professor of Christian Worship, Perkins School
of Theology, Southern Methodist University

The Rev. Kevin L. Strickland, Bishop of the Southeastern Synod of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Jonathan Trapp, Pastor, Church of the Redeemer, Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America; Special Advisor for Emergency Management,
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Dr. Christian Weaver, Infectious Diseases Physician, G.V. (Sonny)
Montgomery Medical Center, VA Medical Center, Jackson, Mississippi

The Rev. Dr. Lisa Weaver, Assistant Professor of Worship, Columbia
Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia.

Deacon John Weit, Assistant to the Presiding Bishop, Executive for
Worship, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Dr. Karen Westerfield Tucker, Boston University School of
Theology

The Rt. Rev. Robert Wright, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

The Rev. Dr. Ruth Meyers, Dean of Academic Affairs and Hodges-Haynes
Professor of Liturgics, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley,
California

The Rev. Dr. Thomas H. Schattauer, Professor of Liturgics and Dean of the
Chapel, Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa

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EDITORIAL AND PRODUCTION STAFF

Gordon Boice, Graphic Designer, Decatur, Georgia

Ulrike R. M. Guthrie, Editor, Orland, Maine

Luke Lea, Research Assistant, Decatur, Georgia