Best Practices for Houses of Worship Organizing or Facilitating Indoor Religious Gatherings

In addition to preparing, posting, and implementing the Social Distancing Protocol as required by Section 9 of Appendix C-2 of Health Officer Order C19-07 (the “Stay-Safer-At-Home Order”) as it may be amended in the future, each House of Worship operating in the City must comply with each requirement listed below and prepare a Health and Safety Plan substantially in the format of Exhibit B, below. Participants and Houses of Worship must also comply with each of the applicable requirements listed below.

Requirements:

1. **Section 1 – Understanding Risk:**

   1.1. All people, including those at risk for severe illness with COVID-19—such as unvaccinated older adults, and unvaccinated individuals with health risks—and members of their household are strongly urged to get vaccinated before participating in activities with other people outside their Household where taking protective measures of wearing face masks and social distancing may be difficult, especially indoors or in crowded spaces.

2. **Section 2 – Educating Personnel and Participants:**

   2.1. Ensure that all Personnel have reviewed and understand the requirements of the Social Distancing Protocol, this Directive, and the Health and Safety Plan.

   2.2. Develop and implement a plan to educate Participants or others who may attend Indoor Religious Gatherings about the relevant requirements of the Social Distancing Protocol, this Directive, and the Health and Safety Plan. For example, a House of Worship may inform its congregation through a combination of emails, clear and conspicuous signage, or frequent public announcements.

   2.3. Identify dedicated Personnel responsible for implementing all requirements of this Directive at a specific House of Worship. Identify dedicated Personnel to assist Participants in maintaining at least six feet physical distance, wearing Face Coverings, and otherwise complying with this Directive.


3. **Section 3 – Making Indoor Spaces Safer:**

   3.1. If safe and feasible, make non-structural alterations to the physical indoor space to facilitate maximum social distancing (at least six feet of physical distance) between members of different Households by, for example, creating physical barriers, moving podiums, identifying dedicated paths of ingress and egress, prohibiting access to lobbies, meeting rooms or other common areas, moving or taping off seating, propping open doors at heavily used entry or exit points, closing every other parking space, and using signage or other indicators to control movement throughout the space and to remind people to
avoid touching common surfaces like door handles. In bathrooms, maximize ventilation and minimize crowding and touching of common surfaces by, for example (and only when feasible), keeping doors propped open, closing every other sink, and posting signage establishing a maximum capacity for bathrooms with clearly marked and distanced queueing areas. Mark off space in seating, prayer or counseling areas to assist Participants in maintaining at least six feet of distance from members of other Households. Indicate walking paths between spaces designated for Participants to kneel so that people do not walk where someone may touch their head to the floor.

3.2. Conspicuously post signage around the House of Worship – including at all primary public entrances – reminding people to adhere to physical distancing, hygiene, and Face Covering Requirements and to stay at home when they feel ill. Posted signage must include all signs required by Sections 4.g and 4.h of the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order. The County is making available templates for the signage available online at: https://sf.gov/outreach-toolkit-coronavirus-covid-19.

3.3. Adequate ventilation is critical to reducing the risk of airborne transmission of the virus in indoor settings, and especially settings where people stay in the same room for a prolonged period. All Houses of Worship must comply with the ventilation protocols at Section 4.i of the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order. Review SFDPH’s guidance for improved ventilation available at: https://www.sfcdcp.org/COVID-ventilation.

3.3.1. If a House of Worship hosts Indoor Religious Gatherings during which any person removes their Face Coverings as expressly permitted by this Directive, the House of Worship must use at least one of the following ventilation strategies: (1) All available windows and doors accessible to fresh outdoor air are kept open (doors and windows required to be kept closed for fire/life safety purposes are exempt; make sure open windows do not create falling hazards especially for children); (2) Fully operational HVAC systems; and/or (3) Portable Air Cleaners in each room that are appropriately sized for the room or area they are deployed in (see https://www.sfcdcp.org/COVID-ventilation for more information). If due to smoke or other conditions, a House of Worship cannot implement any of those measures, the House of Worship cannot have Participants or Personnel remove their Face Coverings until the ventilation measure(s) can be reinstated.

3.4. Clean high touch water vessels, fonts, fountains, and sinks at least once daily or more frequently if required by industry standards and otherwise in accordance with current CDC guidelines. When ceremonial or ritualistic use of water is required, consider using low-touch or single-use alternatives or empty and clean vessels at least once daily or more frequently if required by industry standards. If feasible, consider conducting necessary washing at home or otherwise before arriving at a House of Worship.

3.5. Increase availability of hand sanitizer or hand washing stations around the House of Worship, including at entrances and exits. Ensure that restrooms are adequately stocked with soap and paper towels. Maintain adequate amounts of cleaning supplies, Face Coverings, or other appropriate personal protective equipment for Personnel.

3.6. Develop and implement a plan to clean high-touch areas and surfaces touched by members of more than one Household at least once daily, or more frequently if required by industry standards and otherwise in accordance with current CDC guidelines. Cleaning does not have to occur after each individual person touches a surface unless a person appears
symptomatic or there is visible contamination from nasal or oral secretions. Participants and Hosts should avoid contact with high-touch surfaces when feasible and should practice good hand hygiene.

3.6.1. Require Personnel to clean high touch areas and surfaces following CDC guidelines found at: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/cleaning-disinfection.html. Provide Personnel adequate time and space to complete all sanitation duties. Disinfecting products must be approved for use against COVID-19 on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – approved list found at: https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2-covid-19

4. **Section 4 – Managing Risk During Indoor Religious Gatherings:**

4.1. Strictly limit attendance at Indoor Religious Gatherings to 50% of the capacity of the building. Capacity limits include congregants, visitors and other Participants, but do not include Personnel. The capacity limits apply to discrete rooms or spaces within a House of Worship. For example, if a House of Worship includes a building with a capacity of 400 people, but holds services in a room with an individual capacity of 100 people, the service must be limited to 50 people or fewer (50% of the smaller room’s capacity).

4.1.1. Conspicuously post signage stating the maximum capacity of the space and the maximum capacity currently permitted under the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order. Consider implementing a reservation system to ensure capacity limits are met. Houses of Worship are strongly encouraged to minimize the number of people engaged in an Indoor Religious Gathering.

4.1.2. Encourage Participants to meet with the same group of people at each gathering, particularly if a service meets frequently or requires a minimum number of people to be present.

4.1.3. Simultaneous or overlapping Indoor Religious Gatherings are permitted only under the following circumstances: (1) the gatherings must occur in spaces that are completely physically separated from each other either in distinct rooms separated by sealed floor-to-ceiling walls or in separate buildings; (2) each distinct gathering meets all ventilation requirements of this Directive; (3) Participants at one gathering have completely separate avenues of ingress and egress from the House or Worship or, if a common path of ingress or egress must be used, the House of Worship ensures (such as by creating staggered start times for services) that Participants from different gatherings do not enter or exit the House of Worship at the same time; and (4) before hosting any simultaneous or overlapping gatherings, a House of Worship must develop and maintain a written plan detailing compliance with this subsection.

4.1.3.1. Houses of Worship may not combine groups in different rooms or spaces for a single ceremony or purpose. All Participants in an Indoor Religious Gathering must use the same indoor room or space to attend the same gathering. For example, a House of Worship may not host a single wedding ceremony where some Participants are seated in one indoor room and some are seated in another indoor room or outdoor space.
4.1.4. The capacity limits for Indoor Religious Gatherings apply to religious or cultural ceremonies themselves, and not to any reception or similar gathering before or after. Indoor and outdoor receptions and similar gatherings are permitted only to the extent they comply with applicable provisions of the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order and any related Health Officer directives or guidance.

4.2. Unless otherwise specifically provided in this Directive, strictly follow and enforce all applicable requirements of Health Officer Order C19-07 (the “Stay-Safer-At-Home Order”) and the Face Covering requirements of Health Officer Order C19-12 (the “Face Covering Order”) as they may be amended. Strictly follow and enforce all requirements of this Directive at all times and prohibit all people who fail to comply with this Directive from entering the House of Worship.

4.3. Screen all Participants and Personnel on a daily basis and before entry to the House of Worship using the standard screening questions attached to the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order as Appendix A and Attachments A-1 and A-2 (the “Screening Handouts”). Screening must occur before people enter the House of Worship to attend an Indoor Religious Gathering. A copy of the applicable Screening Handout must be provided to anyone on request, although a poster or other large-format version of the Screening Handouts may be used to review the questions with people verbally. Any person who answers “yes” to any screening question is at risk of having the SARS-CoV-2 virus, must be prohibited from attending the Indoor Religious Gathering, and should be referred for appropriate support as outlined on the Screening Handouts. Houses of Worship can use the guidance available online at https://www.sfcdcp.org/infectious-diseases-a-to-z/coronavirus-2019-novel-coronavirus/coronavirus-2019-businesses/ for determining how best to conduct screening.

4.4. Houses of Worship must be prepared to assist public health authorities in potential contact tracing efforts.

4.5. Ensure that members of different Households remain at least six feet apart at all times during the Indoor Religious Gathering, except for seniors or people with disabilities who may be seated with their caregiver.

4.5.1. Members of different Households may briefly be closer than six feet from a House of Worship’s Personnel if all the following conditions are met: (1) After carefully considering all possible alternatives, a Leader determines that a specific ritual or custom requires a Participant be closer than six feet from Personnel, (2) all people involved in the ritual or custom wear Face Coverings at all times they are within six feet of each other, and (3) the duration of the ritual or custom is as short as possible.

4.6. Singing, chanting, playing wind instruments and other similar activities are permitted in strict accordance with Section 3.i. of the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order and subject to any more stringent applicable State restrictions. Activities such as singing, chanting and playing wind instruments greatly increase the distribution of contaminated exhalations which increases the potential for broad transmission of the virus, particularly in indoor settings. All people are strongly discouraged from engaging in indoor singing, chanting, playing wind instruments or other similar activities.

4.6.1. Houses of Worship are strongly discouraged from organizing an event that encourages Participants to engage in singing, chanting, or shouting or otherwise encourage Participants from doing so during any Indoor Religious Gatherings.
4.6.2. If a Leader or Participant is engaged in prolonged speaking such as during a sermon or reading, they must speak at least six feet from people who are not part of their Household at all times and must wear a Face Covering at all times unless otherwise specifically and expressly provided in this Directive. Leaders and other speakers should not raise their voice and should use microphones or other public address systems whenever feasible.

4.7. Except as specified in this subsection, require that Face Covering be worn at all times by all people – including and in particular while singing, chanting, speaking, reciting, or praying – during Indoor Religious Gatherings unless a Participant is exempt from wearing a Face Covering under the Face Covering Order.

4.7.1. Face Coverings may be removed briefly to eat or drink but only where a Leader determines eating or drinking is essential to a ritual or ceremony and in those instances the Leader must to the greatest extent feasible limit the number of people who remove a Face Covering to one individual at a time;

4.7.2. If a Leader determines it is essential to a ritual or ceremony that Face Coverings be removed, a single person may briefly remove their Face Covering (1) if they do not speak, recite, chant, shout or sing and maintain at least six feet of distance from others while their face is uncovered; or (2) to speak or recite only if they isolate themselves from all other people such as by speaking inside an enclosed chamber or behind a plastic or glass partition or face shield no more than 12 inches from the mouth of the speaker and greater than 12 feet away from any other person.

4.8. Prohibit sharing utensils, food, drink or other items that could result in the transfer of oral or nasal secretions between different Households unless such items can be cleaned between uses.

4.9. High touch objects and surfaces must be cleaned at least once daily, or more frequently if required by industry standards and otherwise in accordance with current CDC guidelines. Cleaning does not have to occur after each individual person touches a surface unless a person appears symptomatic or there is visible contamination from nasal or oral secretions. Participants and Hosts should avoid contact with high-touch surfaces when feasible and should practice good hand hygiene.

4.10. Activities for children such as religious school are allowed if all relevant ventilation, Face Covering, physical distancing, sanitation and other requirements of this Directive and the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order are met at all times. Child care arrangements are allowed only to the extent they are specifically allowed under the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order. Unless as part of an approved child care arrangement, children who are unable to wear a Face Covering and maintain physical distance of at least six feet at all times – such as very young children – must remain in the care of those in their Household and not interact with children of other Households while visiting a House of Worship.

4.11. Use office space consistent with the requirements of the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order.

4.12. The duration of all gatherings should be limited to the maximum extent possible.

4.13. Houses of Worship should discourage informal gathering or congregating after services are complete unless such gatherings are conducted in accordance with the Stay-Safer-At-
Home Order. Houses of Worship are encouraged to facilitate organized ingress and egress that minimizes grouping or queueing such as by having those seated in the back row exit the building first at the end of a service.

4.14. Schedule at least 30 minutes between Indoor Religious Gatherings during which Participants may safely exit and clear the area and House of Worship Personnel may conduct any necessary cleaning and otherwise prepare the space for the next gathering. Houses of Worship may permit Personnel to participate in sequential Indoor Religious Gatherings during a single day but are reminded of the increased potential to transmit the virus from one gathering to another. Personnel participating in sequential Indoor Religious Gatherings must thoroughly wash hands and clean or replace any items or clothing that have come in contact with Participants or different House of Worship Personnel during earlier gatherings.

4.15. Keep other areas of a House of Worship closed unless otherwise expressly permitted to operate under the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order. Facilities such as day care centers, schools, kitchens, food service areas, gymnasiums or indoor athletic facilities, and children’s play structures and areas are not permitted to operate unless in compliance with the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order and any applicable Health Officer orders or directives.

4.16. This Directive establishes minimum best practices applicable generally to all Houses of Worship. Houses of Worship are encouraged to apply the concepts and spirit of this Directive to modify their rituals in a collective effort to mitigate the risk of transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19. Examples include, but are not limited to, discontinuing kissing of ritual objects, allowing rites to be performed by fewer people, discontinuing the use of a common cup, offering communion in the hand instead of on the tongue, or providing pre-packed communion items on chairs prior to service. Houses of Worship also must implement and enforce any additional or more restrictive guidance regarding religious gatherings provided by the Centers for Disease Control or the California Department of Public Health found at https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/; and https://covid19.ca.gov/pdf/guidance-places-of-worship.pdf.

Nothing in this Section allows a House of Worship to replace, supplement, or change any restriction in the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order, this Directive, or any local, state, or federal health order or guidance related to COVID-19 with a less restrictive measure. For clarity, all Houses of Worship must strictly implement every measure in this Directive and should only supplement new or different safety measures to the extent they are more restrictive (i.e., more protective of public health) than any local, state, or federal health order or guidance related to COVID-19.