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 the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order, 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. Engaging in any gathering that includes individuals who are not part of a single Household increases the probability of transmitting COVID-19. The probability of transmission generally increases when gatherings are held indoors. Accordingly, while it is essential for many people’s spiritual and mental health to continue to practice their religious faith or attend cultural ceremonies and while the risks can be reduced by following the best practices required under this Directive, it is strongly recommended that all people avoid gatherings including for religious or cultural services, especially indoors. Instead people are encouraged to use temporary alternatives such as observing services or events live-streamed over the internet whenever possible or participating in small outdoor events of limited duration where they practice physical distancing, wear Face Coverings and take other safety precautions. For best practices related to outdoor gatherings, see Directive 2020-19c found at [www.sfdph.org/directives](http://www.sfdph.org/directives).

   1.2. If people wish to participate in an Indoor Religious Gathering, they should consider the risks to themselves and others before doing so and should take all possible steps to mitigate those risks, including those required under this Directive. Any person involved in an Indoor Religious Gathering should read and make themselves familiar with this Directive and related guidance from the San Francisco Department of Public Health.

   1.3. All people are reminded that the risk involved in gathering involves not only personal risk but also an increased risk of community transmission of COVID-19 that may extend far beyond those who participate in a gathering.

   1.4. Members of vulnerable populations (those over age 65 or with chronic medical conditions) are encouraged to carefully consider their increased risk of negative health outcomes from exposure to COVID-19 before determining whether to participate in an Indoor Religious Gathering. And seniors and other people with chronic conditions or compromised immune systems – and those who live with seniors and people with such conditions- are strongly urged to defer attending Indoor Religious Gatherings at this time and to find safer alternatives to practice their faith, such as participating in outdoor services or remote streaming of services. Houses of Worship are also strongly urged to continue supporting options for Participants to participate in services without engaging in in-person attendance.

   1.5. Risk increases with frequency, duration and proximity of exposure. People are strongly discouraged from attending more than one Indoor Religious Gathering per week. The more contacts a person has with others, including during Indoor Religious Gatherings, the more they are placing themselves and others at risk of transmitting the virus.
Before entering the House of Worship all people must be screened for symptoms or close contacts as provided in Section 4.3 below.

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.

   2.4. Prepare Personnel to respond to suspected or confirmed positive cases at the House of Worship in accordance with the Social Distancing Protocol. Guidance on responding to positive cases at your House of Worship can be found here under the tab for Businesses and Employers in the Information and Guidance for the Public section: https://www.sfcdcp.org/infectious-diseases-a-to-z/coronavirus-2019-novel-coronavirus/.

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. Discontinue use of high touch water vessels, fonts, fountains, and sinks. When ceremonial or ritualistic use of water is required, use low-touch or single-use alternatives or empty and disinfect vessels before they are used by people from different households or living units. 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 disinfectant and cleaning supplies, Face Coverings, or other appropriate personal protective equipment for Personnel.

3.6. Develop and implement a plan to frequently clean and disinfect common use areas and surfaces touched by members of more than one Household in accordance with the Social Distancing Protocol.

3.6.1. Disinfect all surfaces attendees touch at the gathering, including, but not limited to, seating areas, railings, prayer books and hymnals, ceremonial objects, microphones, podiums, pulpits, music stands, and door surfaces. If pews, chairs, or pillows used for sitting are of a porous material, use and replace disposable or washable coverings between each Participant when possible. If cleaning high touch surfaces on or near the floor, avoid sweeping or vacuuming while others are present. Whenever possible, use a vacuum with a HEPA filter. If sweeping is necessary, gently sweep floors to prevent spreading pathogens. Personnel responsible for cleaning must wear a Face Covering at all times. Clean and disinfect high touch surfaces within restrooms regularly throughout the working day.

3.6.2. Disinfecting products must be approved for use against COVID-19 on the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – approved list available 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 25% 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 25 people or fewer (25% 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 receptions and similar gatherings are not permitted at this time. Any outdoor reception or gathering is subject to rules governing outdoor gatherings including Health Officer Directive 2020-19 found at www.sfdph.org/directives.

4.2. Unless otherwise specifically provided in this Directive, strictly follow and enforce all applicable requirements of Health Officer Order C19-07s (the “Stay-Safer-At-Home Order”) and the Face Covering requirements of Health Officer Order C19-12d (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. Consider maintaining a list of Participants willing to voluntarily provide their name for contact tracing purposes. Any lists should be discarded after three weeks. If a Participant tests positive for COVID-19, the House of Worship must assist the Department of Public Health to identify other Participants who may have been exposed to help prevent further spread of COVID-19.

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. Consistent with the State’s health guidance, singing and chanting activities are not permitted during an Indoor Religious Gathering at this time. Even while wearing a Face Covering, these activities – in particular singing and chanting – greatly increase the distribution of contaminated exhalations which increases the potential for broad transmission of the virus.

4.6.1. Houses of Worship must not organize 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 12 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 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 of items such as food or drink, reading materials, and religious or spiritual objects among people outside of their Household. If an object is of critical importance and must be shared during an Indoor Religious Gathering, take every precaution after each instance of sharing to clean and sanitize the object and/or the hands of the Participants and Houses of Worship who share the object. If sanitation of an object is not feasible, ensure those touching or handling the object properly wash or sanitize their hands before and after touching the object.

4.9. Discontinue passing offering plates and similar items that move between members of different Households. Use alternative giving options such as secure drop boxes that do not require opening/closing and can be cleaned and disinfected. Consider implementing digital systems that allow Participants to make touch-free offerings.

4.10. Disinfect microphones and stands, music stands, instruments and other items on pulpits and podiums between each use by members of a different Household. Consult equipment manufacturers to determine appropriate disinfection steps, particularly for soft, porous surfaces such as foam mufflers.

4.11. 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.

4.12. Keep office space closed except to the extent accessory office space that is physically located within a House of Worship may be used in accordance with Section 11 of Appendix C-1 of the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order and Health Officer Directive 2020-18. Only Leaders and any other Personnel necessary for allowed operations who cannot work remotely can use the accessory office space. Personnel who can work remotely are required to do so.

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

4.14. Houses of Worship must prohibit any gathering or congregating after services are complete. 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.

4.15. 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 adequately clean and sanitize all high touch surfaces 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, sanitize, or replace any items or clothing that have come in contact with Participants or different House of Worship Personnel during earlier gatherings.

4.16. 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.

4.17. 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/index.html; 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.