

A Journey by Stages: Regathering in Stage Two

Meetings among participants in youth groups in the Diocese of Massachusetts

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic moved most of our work online. Many youth groups got by with Zoom calls, virtual game nights and drive-by graduation parades. Other activities have fallen to the wayside for the time being. Now, during a stage when restrictions on gatherings begin to ease, youth groups and Confirmation classes are wondering about finding ways to gather in person. This is a reasonable instinct; the [importance of social interaction](#) during the adolescent years can't be overstated.

That said, if congregations decide to gather groups of middle and high school students together, it must be done in the safest possible way. The [A Journey By Stages](#) guidelines, assembled by the dioceses of Massachusetts and Western Massachusetts, provide a wealth of helpful information; the protocols that follow in this document are a supplement and seek to clarify how the guidelines for small group meetings apply to youth ministry gatherings during Stage Two.

If after reading and carefully considering these guidelines, a congregation decides to gather young people together in person, it is important to do so only with parents' and/or guardians' explicit, written consent. A sample form is included in this document.

Here is what A Journey By Stages has to say about small groups meeting during Stage Two:

“Small group gatherings for those at lower risk are permitted, while maintaining strict physical distancing, sanitation and hygiene practices, and limitation of the size of the group as mandated by government and public health authorities.”

Here are some more specific protocols:

What does strict physical distancing look like?

- Groups from different households must remain six feet apart at all times.
 - The CDC recommends offering multiple entrances and exits to a meeting space. If possible, different doors should be designated as entrances and exits.
 - Plan for how to use restrooms safely: Limit how many people can be in the restroom at a time. Identify who is to be accountable to ensure cleaning at the end of the gathering.
 - Wave and verbally greet each other, instead of shaking hands, hugging or doing an elbow bump.
- Good ventilation (bringing in fresh air and not just recirculating air) can help disperse the respiratory droplets that carry the virus. Meeting outdoors is the best way to ensure good airflow. If you can't meet outdoors, make sure that:
 - The room you're meeting in is large enough to allow physical distancing;
 - All ventilation systems are working well;
 - Doors and windows are open to the outdoors when possible;

- Fans are set up in such a way that they aren't blowing directly from one person to another, to minimize the spread of droplets.

What do strict sanitation and hygiene practices look like?

- All surfaces should be wiped down carefully before and after the meeting, especially if the meeting takes place indoors. Follow the [guidelines from the CDC](#) for cleaning and disinfecting.
- At no point should objects be shared between people from different households.
- Everyone present must wear a [cloth face covering](#) (other than a bandana) for the duration of the gathering. (Bandanas typically aren't well fit and hang too loosely.)
- Make sure there is sufficient soap in the restrooms (if meeting indoors) and hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol), and encourage frequent handwashing and sanitizing.

What does limitation of the size of the group look like?

- According to the [MA Reopening Plan](#), the current maximum size for indoor in-person gatherings is eight people per 1,000 square feet, with an absolute maximum of 25 people.
- Though there is no official time limit, the risk of transmission gets higher the longer people are together, so try to limit the length of in-person meetings, particularly those held indoors, to 30 minutes or so.
- Additionally, be sure to keep a record of who was present, in case someone present ends up testing positive and you need to provide a list for contact tracing.

For more ideas and resources, refer to the CDC's "[Personal and Social Activities](#)" guidelines, as well as their [general resources for people ages 15-21](#). In assembling this guide, sources referenced were [A Journey By Stages](#) and church leadership, as well as official guidelines from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) and the [World Health Organization](#).

For situations not covered by this protocol, err on the side of caution, and contact the Diocese of Massachusetts [Office of Youth Ministries](#) with any questions. Please act with the best interests of your young people, their families, their classmates and their communities in mind. Thank you for your care and cooperation until we can all meet together again fearlessly.

<< Your congregation's name and location here >>

Regathering Covenants for Youth Participants and Parents/Guardians

Participant Covenant

- I understand that COVID-19 continues to pose a real threat to the health and safety of my community and that we are regathering for meetings very cautiously.
- I will maintain a minimum of six feet of physical distance between myself and others.
- I will wear a mask or other protective face covering during our meetings and get-togethers.
- I will limit myself to waves and verbal greetings instead of fist bumps, elbow bumps, shaking hands or any other kind of physical contact.
- I will follow these and other guidelines set forth by the program leader(s) in order to minimize the spread of the virus and keep myself and others safe.
- I will do my best to help others in this group follow these procedures.
- I promise not to attend an in-person gathering if I am feeling sick on the day of, and that if I begin to experience symptoms associated with the coronavirus afterward, I will notify my parents immediately.
- I confirm that I will not attend an in-person gathering if I have tested positive for COVID-19 in the last two weeks, or if I have come into contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the last two weeks.

I make this covenant with my siblings in Christ and. I agree to abide by the above guidelines.

Participant Signature: _____ **Name (printed):** _____

Date: _____

PARENT/GUARDIAN COVENANT

- I understand that during this gathering, precautions will be taken according to the A Journey By Stages guidelines, state and local regulations, and the Protocol for In-Person Youth Ministry Meetings.
- I understand that, though these precautions are being taken, there is still some risk of transmission of COVID-19 to me and others present.
- I will not allow my child to attend an in-person gathering if they are feeling sick on the day of, and that if they begin to experience symptoms associated with the coronavirus afterward, I will notify the program leader(s) immediately.
- I will not allow my child to attend an in-person gathering if they have tested positive for COVID-19 in the last two weeks, or if they have come into contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the last two weeks.
- I have reviewed the above "Participant Covenant" with my child.
- I, as parent or legal guardian of the above youth, give permission for the above youth to attend youth meetings while our church is in Stage Two of our regathering according to A Journey by Stages.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ **Name (printed):** _____

Date: _____