

Opening Considerations for Religious Education Programs in the Diocese of Boise

COVID-19 SUPPORT

Jackie Hopper
DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND CATECHETICAL LEADERSHIP |

The pastoral care of our children and youth remains a high priority in the age of Covid-19. This pastoral care must “first be a humanizing and missionary outreach, which means being capable of seeing the signs of God’s love and call in human experience. It is in the light of faith that the search for truth and freedom, the desire to love and be loved, personal aspirations and the impassioned commitment to others and to the world find their authentic meaning.”(General Directory #252) In the Diocese of Boise, upmost care and attention must be given to the reality of the importance of Catholic Identity. We may not overlook the importance of the concrete need for evangelization and the kerygma. We must respond in a way that listens deeply and provides opportunities for all to grow in their faith.

The question of whether we open up our parish religious education programs is not one of if, as it questions its importance, but rather of how amid the current realities in the world. How can we hold the obligation of formation in liturgical spiritual, doctrinal, and moral areas of faith with the safety of those teaching, gathered, and connected in balance? Below you will find considerations, best practices, and suggested protocols for ensuring we continue to provide this pastoral care.

We are called to make disciples, build community, and inspire witnesses. Especially during this time of great uncertainty and turmoil for the individuals, families, and communities served by our Church, we must seek new and creative ways to lead them closer to Christ and one another and to share the Gospel as a light to our world. Continuing to provide religious education will build a stronger sense of missionary discipleship and creatively engage your students and families in their own faith journeys. We must continue to build community and witness the Kingdom of God in the midst of a lost and fearful world.

Guiding Principles

Five guiding principles influenced considerations in reopening religious education programs. They are:

1. Intentional planning needs to take place to ensure that religious education and youth ministry resume this fall in a safe, timely manner with quality, meaningful faith formation.
2. The current situation in our Diocese is diverse. While some places have large areas of community spread and are fragile, others are seeing extremely low instances of the virus. We understand that these conditions are shifting regularly and will demand that we use data and real time adjustments in our programming decisions. Flexibility and adaptability are necessary elements of any faith formation programming, especially this year.
3. Trust needs to be established so that families can be confident that the top priority is the safety and well-being of people. We cannot take for granted that students, parents, staff, and volunteer catechists will feel safe just because programs open. Ongoing engagement and

communication with parents are essential; this is the ideal time to foster a sense of partnership with parents in the faith formation of their children.

4. Calling people to exercise faithful citizenship will be key. Each family will need to take personal responsibility for the common good as well as their own safety. There is an opportunity also for parishes to encourage parents to re-evaluate their personal responsibility for their own lifelong faith formation as well as the formation of their children. We have great opportunity in this time to build up and support the domestic church.

5. Programs need to balance the value of building community and connecting to a parish community with safeguarding public health. Each parish will need to thoughtfully consider the necessary frequency of in-person program elements and augment with virtual and at-home alternatives.

Initial Considerations

- Engage your pastor in the planning for opening the program for the 2020/2021 school year.
- Select a model based on your resources (curriculum, tech platform, availability of catechists) that fit your desired model and unique parish community.
- Train catechists and volunteers in the Covid Safety plan specific to your program.
- Consider how to assist RE parents in their comfort level with faith sharing.
- Understand the vocational dimension of catechesis which “requires the pathways of formation be developed in reference to life experiences” (General Directory #253).
- Check out the CDC’s recommendations for [Considerations for Communities of Faith](#).
- Continue to design meaningful and relevant prayer and ongoing faith formation opportunities for catechists, families, and students to deepen their spirituality and commitment as missionary disciples.

Options for Fall of 2020 and beyond if necessary

It is important to keep in mind that the public health situation and the need for Catholic Identity call upon us to prioritize meaningful engagement that honors the needs and concerns of people today. During this time of ongoing uncertainty surrounding long-term planning, it is prudent to keep in mind that Religious Education settings for the upcoming pastoral year are fluid. Parishes will likely need to adjust programs according to current realities and local regulations. Pastors and catechetical leaders must remain flexible and be willing to adapt religious education programming during the year based on needs and current realities.

- **VIRTUAL PROGRAMMING** Virtual settings have become a reality for religious education programming. The impact of Covid-19 has allowed us to understand we can deliver high-quality online instruction with interactive methodologies, supporting Catholic Identity, and building community.

Each parish should consider incorporating virtual/at-home elements to its programming, for the following reasons:

- Some parishes may deem a return to the physical space for religious education unsafe.
- The public health situation may shift, resulting in a rollback of on-site programming.
- Some families may not be comfortable engaging in on-site activities or may be prohibited from doing so should an instance of COVID-19 exposure occur in their families, school cohort or at the parish itself.
- Volunteer catechists may not feel comfortable returning to classroom or face-to-face teaching environment thus resulting in lack of qualified catechists for in person gathering.
- Logistics and planning considerations for virtual settings include technology support, developing and delivering high-quality online instruction with interactive methodology, supporting Catholic Identity, and maintaining community.

- **ON-SITE PROGRAMMING** Parishes that can gather in person, following any community restrictions, must adhere to safety guidelines and have in place outbreak and cleaning protocols. IF on-site programming meets in the parish school facility, the guidelines for the school must be adhered to for the religious education program. Be sure to remain in close communication with the Pastor and school principal to ensure that the changing guidelines are followed. Care and guidance must be executed when recruiting volunteer catechists to teach in a face-to-face setting. These volunteers must agree to follow all Covid-19 protocols in place in addition to the normal child protection guidelines.

Considerations must be made for:

- drop off and pick up protocols that reduce the number of people gathering
- use of learning supplies
- space-sharing
- general facility cleaning and sanitizing
- guidelines for masks and other PPE
- social distancing protocol for inside and outside events
- student movement for breaks, restroom use and behavioral considerations,
- sudden illness and outbreak protocols

- **BLENDED PROGRAMMING** On-site programming may need to be modified due to space restrictions, availability of non-vulnerable catechists, or increasing Covid-19 restrictions put in place by local health department or Diocese. This programming methodology will allow for in-person instruction, community building and a stronger sense of Catholic Identity to be developed and nurtured in an ongoing manner. The model may use household units, grade level gatherings or divisions by some other methodology (alphabetical, neighborhoods, or by registration).



IMPORTANT-Attendance records should be kept for contact tracing for all gathered events.

Health and Safety Considerations

The following considerations are not intended as an end all list of the considerations that must be in place for the staff, volunteer, participant, or family involved in the religious education program at a parish. We must dutifully monitor the new health information as it is released and take steps to incorporate these considerations in our program as we find necessary.

- Onboard catechists, volunteers, parents, and students in the new realities to the program.
- Face masks are needed for both catechists and students (children age 3 and above are encouraged to wear a face mask).
- Hand sanitizer should be at every entrance and in each meeting space.
- Declutter meeting space to allow for ease of cleaning.
- Ensure that social distancing can take place. Consider placing visible reminders of the space needed between entrance and exit, occupied seats, and in meeting space.
- Consider using cohorts for specific areas of shared space i.e. bathrooms, snack area etc...
- Post signs in common space and restrooms for safe mask wear, hand washing and symptoms of Covid-19 .
- Parents should conduct a temperature check before child is dropped off for gathered activity as well as ensure that the symptoms associated with Covid-19 are not present.
- Supplies for class work should be bagged for individual use and labeled with name of the participant.
- Snacks served should be pre-packaged and handed out by adult who is taking all necessary health precautions. These may include mask, face shield and gloves. Consideration should be giving to not serving snacks to reduce spread potential.
- Hands should be sanitized before receiving snacks.
- Social distancing must be maintained both indoors and outside for any gathered event.

Catechists in at risk groups or who are anxious about teaching face to face

The Parish catechetical leader will need to continue to encourage, invite, recruit and train catechetical leaders to deliver the parish's religious education program. Care should be taken to place the individual and his/her needs as a priority in this current situation. Connect with each catechist to discuss their hopes and concerns for the upcoming year and help them find a place to continue their ministry. Parish catechetical leaders should communicate regularly with catechists in this time of uncertainty and inquire to see if they are part of an at-risk group for COVID or have an immediate family member who is part of an at-risk group. Catechists who express anxiety about returning even if they are not part of an at-risk group should be invited to

participate at the level they feel comfortable. Catechists in a vulnerable population who are unable to volunteer at this time should be encouraged take on support roles in the parish religious education program through prayer and planning support via a virtual platform. If possible, catechists should be given the option of teaching (or co-teaching) a religious education class virtually. For those catechists who have discerned to no longer teach religious education (in-person and/or virtually), parish catechetical leaders should remain in contact with them and update them on future opportunities for involvement if/when they feel more comfortable.

The new reality and forming community

The possibility exists that the new religious education programming year may begin on-site but quickly shift to remote learning, or that the year may begin with a full remote learning program and incorporate on-site gatherings later. With this in mind, special care must be given to prioritizing means of creating and supporting community (virtually and in-person) with religious education program students and families. A central question to consider is “How will we build a sense of discipleship community in our religious education program?” Consider the following:

- Develop an on-boarding plan for all students and families to orient them to new procedures in place.
- Catechists can consider scheduling a series of one-on-one or small group sessions to get to know students and parents.
- Establish a classroom meeting routine which includes greeting, prayer, sharing, and ice breaker activities. This routine can continue throughout remote learning.
- Take advantage of opportunities and create plans to engage parents in at-home activities that will help live fully into the domestic church.
- Programs should take advantage of previous gathered successes and build on these experiences in both face to face gathering and in the virtual setting.
- Be on the lookout for early warning signs to identify volunteers, students and families that are struggling. Plan for ways to help manage stress and anxiety as a regular component of your program.

Using shared space with Catholic school

Work with the school principal to develop an agreed upon plan for controlled access to the building for religious education programming (i.e., transition periods from when the school is in session to when religious education classes start). Ensure that school staff, students and cleaning staff is scheduled to exit the shared space at least 30 minutes prior to parish staff or volunteers arriving. Note that additional time may be needed for cleaning staff depending on number of classrooms to be sanitized and number of cleaning staff. A sanitization schedule needs to be negotiated between the school principal and parish catechetical leader regarding shared space. The sanitization schedule and shared-space arrangements need to be clearly communicated to schoolteachers and catechists. Classrooms and common surfaces in shared spaces (e.g. office, bathrooms, doorknobs, stair handrails, etc.) should be cleaned before and

after religious education classes. In cases where the sanitization guidelines specific to school space has been set forth by schools, those should be followed by the religious education program. In cases where guidelines regarding school space have not been implemented, or where parish spaces are concerned, the parish catechetical leader is responsible for ensuring the sanitization schedule of those spaces.

Infection protocol

If a student is exhibiting a fever or two or more other COVID-19 symptoms, they should be immediately separated from others (ideally in a separate room with clear line-of-sight with a responsible adult). Students should never be left alone and must always be supervised while maintaining necessary health and safety precautions of social distancing and use of PPE. Parents should be immediately contacted so the student may be taken home. Parishes should utilize other emergency contacts if parents are not reached. Students should not return until they have either been tested and determined to not have Covid and are symptom free for 24 hours with no OTC medicine. Students should be allowed to complete and submit work remotely during time away from religious education classes. Faith formation lessons may be emailed home to students/parents for at-home learning while absent from religious education classes. If a student is positively diagnosed for COVID-19, follow the Isolation Protocol outlined below.

Isolation protocol

The following steps should be implemented if a program participant, volunteer, or employee is positively diagnosed with COVID-19:

1. For the purposes of religious education any student in contact with the infected participant should be notified, however: a. Do NOT share any personal details regarding the infected individual. In the case of students, the catechist or volunteer who ministers directly to the student's cohort may be informed that the student will temporarily discontinue or partake in virtual programming. b. Be specific as to whether the infection occurred within the cohort of the student/family being notified.
2. The student, employee, or volunteer should remain at home and monitored for ongoing symptoms.
3. The student or catechist's classroom/work area should be thoroughly cleaned. Windows in the area should be opened to maximize air flow.
4. The parish catechetical leader should carefully monitor the health of students and catechists who are part of the infected individual's cohort. If a second student or catechist in the cohort is diagnosed with COVID-19, the entire cohort will quarantine. Consideration should be given to moving to a virtual platform until the 14-day quarantine period has passed with no new outbreaks.

These guidelines are provided by the Office of Religious Education and Catechetical Leadership. Please direct any questions or concerns to Jackie Hopper at jhopper@rcdb.org