

Model for Renewing Face-to-Face Community and Worship

In the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, many of us imagined that we would return to normal, to worship on Sunday morning, caring for our neighbors, weekly Bible studies and small groups, all at once. We are now recognizing that this return to life outside of our homes will happen gradually, in phases.

What future we will find ourselves in depends not only on the behavior of the virus, but on the actions of people – as individuals, churches, communities, and governments. The way forward will not be a matter of following a timetable, but of faithfully discerning the signs of the times, and responding accordingly.

We find ourselves now at a threshold, discerning together how best to re-enter life together. The founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, encouraged us to consider three rules as we seek to follow Jesus in the world: do no harm, do good and attend to the ordinances of God (the practices that help us to love God and others well). The following recommendations are offered in the spirit of those three rules, with the hope that, throughout the pandemic, we will do no harm to one another, that we will find creative ways to do good, and that in all these things we will come to love God and God's people more deeply.

Below are our recommendations of how to phase a church reopening which aligns with the phases offered from Governor Cooper's office. In developing this document, we are indebted to the Wisconsin Council of Churches, as well as the Iowa Conference of the United Methodist Church, whose work greatly aided in the creation of this resource. We offer it as a framework to guide clergy and lay leaders in making healthy and pastoral decisions, not as a fixed set of guidelines that will account for every circumstance. All ministry is contextual and we know that you will continue to respond in ways that account for your particular congregation and local conditions. You may need to consult local health officials or your District Superintendent as you finalize decisions.

A prayer from Bishop Hope Morgan Ward:

Ever-living God, we pray for your light and life as the pandemic continues, threatening the human family in every place. We look to you, Jesus Christ, our Great Physician, for wisdom and strength as we lead our churches and communities. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray for healing of body, mind, spirit and relationships to abound across the breadth of our world. We offer this prayer with humility, in the strong hope that we will be faithful as we serve you and one another now and always with loving hearts. Amen.

PHASE ONE (May 8th, 5 pm)

In Governor Cooper's plan, Phase One begins when criteria noted in the linked plan have been met (May 8th, unless otherwise indicated by your county officials). In summary, two weeks of declining cases of COVID-19, availability of PPE and an increase in testing and tracing capabilities. The Governor's Reopening Plan can be found [here](#) along with a helpful [FAQ here](#).

NCCUMC Recommendations for Phase One:

- Continue offering online worship services only.
 - Some congregations are choosing to offer drive-in worship experiences. Below are some best practices related to this way of worshipping:
 - Work with local and county government officials to make them aware of your plans.
 - Ensure that the gathering is adhering to noise restrictions as well as social distancing guidelines.
 - Use AM or FM transmitters to broadcast sound.
 - Do not pass out any bulletins or paper materials in order to avoid cross contamination.
 - Limit the number of volunteers to 10 and have them spaced out and wearing masks.
 - If collecting an offering, have an unmanned container that people can deposit money into, without touching, on their way in or out of the parking area.
 - Use [bit.ly](#) or another service for announcements, words to music and scripture.
 - Remind everyone to stay in their vehicles at all times.

While the NC government has allowed outdoor worship, our recommendation continues to err on the side of minimizing risk. We recommend not holding worship services outdoors, however, if you choose to do so here are guidelines we strongly urge:

- Minimum of 6 feet social distancing between family units.
- Congregational singing remains a risk outdoors so we recommend against singing and urge churches to utilize alternate methods of bringing hymns to services.
- Any part of the service that might be an opportunity for touching should be eliminated.
- The offering should be given without physical contact between the congregant and receptacle used for giving. Utilize a non-touch receptacle as congregants leave worship.

- If your church offers an outside worship service, we recommend that you do so in the relative safety of vehicles with at least 6 feet of separation between each vehicle.
- If churches worship outside of vehicles in an outdoor space, ensure that no family unit is closer than 6 feet to another family unit.
- Encourage congregation members to connect virtually with God and one another through [the Love Feast](#).
- Consider resuming recording in sanctuaries/worship spaces, while maintaining at least 6 ft of space between people – greater distance between those who are singing.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals, baptisms) should be kept to less than 10 in attendance. See this [Guide to Funerals During COVID-19](#) for additional resources.
- Bible studies, small groups and administrative meetings continue to gather online.
- Pastoral Care continues to be offered through phone calls, online gatherings, letters, etc
- Keep office functions as limited as possible to ensure essential operations. Those in the office should be wearing masks while in any shared space or common area; if you have more than one person in the office, make sure that surfaces, including the phone, are regularly sanitized.
- Continued teleworking for staff.
- Sanitize spaces routinely/after use, utilizing [CDC Guidelines](#).
- High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff or volunteers, should continue to shelter in place.

PHASE TWO (May 22, 5 pm, subject to change)

In Governor Cooper's plan, the shift from Phase One to Phase Two is based on a re-evaluation of the situation using the original criteria. The Governor's Reopening Plan can be found [here](#) along with a helpful [FAQ here](#).

NCCUMC Recommendations for Phase Two:

Worship:

- Continue offering online worship services as there will be many who are at high risk and cannot join you, or may not feel safe to return even if precautions are in place. Those at greater risk, over 60 or having underlying medical issues, should continue worshipping virtually.
- Consider the coordination of home church experiences (within gathering guidelines) where individuals can watch worship together, share a meal, engage in discussion.

- When possible, the wearing of masks and/or spatial separation should be strongly considered during small gatherings that involve multiple households during this phase.
- Pastors may consider circuit riding to home church gatherings in order to share Holy Communion or continue to utilize [the Love Feast](#).
- Depending on the number of people allowed in large group gatherings, some churches may choose to gather in person during Phase Two. Though we strongly encourage the continuation of meeting virtually, if congregations choose to resume in-person worship, they are encouraged to do so with the following considerations:
 - Explore gathering in the largest space on your campus - Fellowship Hall, outside if possible.
 - Utilize gloved and masked door and elevator greeters to be in charge of opening doors and pushing the elevator's buttons.
 - Ask worshippers to wear masks (consider providing masks at the door).
 - Allow for ample space between worshippers, encouraging four people per row, with an empty row in between, or other pattern that provides a six foot radius beyond the perimeters of family units. Have an emergency plan to accommodate overflow or attendance beyond state guidelines.
 - As singing is among the riskier behaviors because it spreads droplets/aerosols which can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air highly increasing the risk of infection, congregations should refrain from group singing through Phase Two. Therefore, in lieu of congregational and mass choir singing, as an alternative, offer non-participatory music options.
 - Do not invite children to come forward for a children's moment.
 - Plan carefully for how Holy Communion can be shared with the congregation. Most practices of blessing and receiving call for close proximity. Consider offering individual communion cups that can be picked up at the end of worship, given out by communion servers wearing gloves and masks. But even these careful practices present risk. A continued fast from Holy Communion may be preferable.
 - If a baptism takes place, ask the parents to hold the baby throughout rather than having the clergyperson do so.
 - Adjust practices of gathering the offering (one place of offering, no passing of plates)
 - Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace.
 - Consider alternatives to printed/passed bulletins. Options include: 1. Using screens for the liturgy. 2. Share a link to the bulletin prior to worship and invite people to pull up on smartphones as the service begins 3. Place paper bulletins on pew/chairs, using gloved hands, several days before worship, individuals take bulletins home to dispose.

- Consider removing items from chairs/pews including hymnals, bibles, offering envelopes, particularly for those holding multiple worship services on Sunday.
- Do not offer a fellowship/coffee hour.
- Restroom capacities that allow safe distancing should be thought through and posted.
- Do not engage in a receiving line after worship.
- Continue to offer livestream/worship recordings for those who cannot or will not yet return to worship.
- Create a plan for sanitizing the worship space between services if more than one is offered following [CDC cleaning guidance](#).

Small Groups and Faith Formation:

- Offer opportunities for Bible studies and small groups to meet in person or online. We recommend maintaining some online options for people who do not feel comfortable gathering in person.
- We recommend against offering Vacation Bible School in person. While the risk to children is somewhat lower, there is an ongoing risk of them carrying the virus back home and sharing it with other family members. Whether or not they are symptomatic, someone who is infected can spread the virus. Consider whether you might offer an online or no-touch drop-off activity.
- Similarly, we anticipate mission trips to be unwise for some time. This is an ideal time for mission in the local area. Are there food pantries or other community services in need of volunteers? Practice the art of mission in place. Keep your groups small so as not to overwhelm the ministries you serve. You are there to assist, not to occupy or divert their resources.
- Retreats and lock-ins carry similar risks and we recommend pausing such activities until Phase 3 or beyond.
- Pastoral Care continues to be offered through phone calls, online gatherings, letters, etc. Some one-on-one gatherings may resume while maintaining social distance. Nursing homes and hospitals will likely continue to have restrictions for visitation in place.

Church Business:

- Offices can re-open for staff and volunteers, focusing on masks in communal spaces, frequent pauses for hand washing, and sanitizing of spaces and objects (phones, laptops, etc) throughout the day. If possible, provide masks for those visiting the office. You are encouraged to place hand-sanitizing stations throughout your facility, including at your entrance/exit areas.

- Staff meetings may resume in person, allowing for teleworking based on individual circumstances (children at home, age, immuno-compromised).
- Church councils and other leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, or continue meeting online.
- Allow building users/renters to resume as long as they are able to observe gathering limits and distancing and sanitizing protocols. Renters plans for meeting these criteria will be reviewed by appropriate staff/Trustees/Facilities teams as needed.

General Building:

- Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
- Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
- Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces and restrooms.
- If you become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, put your communication plan into action, cooperate fully with contact tracers and clean impacted spaces following [CDC guidelines](#).
- High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff, volunteers, or program participants, should continue to shelter in place.

PHASE THREE

In Governor Cooper's plan, the shift from Phase Two to Phase Three is based on a re-evaluation of the situation using the original criteria. The Governor's Reopening Plan can be found [here](#) along with a helpful [FAQ here](#).

NCCUMC Phase Three Recommendations

It is possible that conditions will not improve, but infections will increase again. In that case, physical distancing recommendations would need to be tightened temporarily in order to get back on track. Progress will not necessarily be linear. You can help by encouraging careful hygiene, adherence to physical/social distancing recommendations, encouraging people to stay at home if they have any symptoms of illness, and cooperating with contact tracers if they are diagnosed.

Worship:

- We recommend that churches continue to offer online worship. See Phase Two for rationale and best practices.
- Churches may decide to resume in person worship gatherings. See Phase Two for best practices.
- Watch for public health recommendations related to communal singing and Holy Communion. We will also update this resource as further information is shared.
- Continue to use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources. Consider removing prayerbooks and Bibles if you will have multiple services. Use bulletins (do not reuse) or screens as alternatives.
- We recommend against offering a fellowship/coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.

Small Groups and Faith Formation:

- Bible studies and small groups may choose to meet in person. We recommend maintaining some online options for high risk individuals and those who do not feel comfortable being in public.
- See VBS recommendations from Phase Two.
- Hospitals and care facilities are recommended to continue limiting visitors, which will continue to impact the ways we offer pastoral care and visitation.

Church Business:

- Office functions could resume as normal, with continued attention to cleaning.
- Groups, teams, and committees could meet in person.

General Building Guidelines for Each phase:

- Post signs indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
- Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
- Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.
- If you become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, put your communication plan into action, cooperate fully with contact tracers and if someone who has recently used church facilities is diagnosed with COVID-19, clean the area following [CDC guidance](#).

Preparing the Building for Reopening:

- Deep clean your entire church. While we recognize our churches have been empty for weeks and the virus has limited potency after certain periods of time, deep-cleaning brings peace of mind and care of facility.
- Replace all HVAC filters (furnace, air conditioning, air cleaner devices) and increase frequency of filter replacement.
- Consider shampooing carpets and updating areas in need of care, upkeep or maintenance. This time of facility care can focus us on what we can do now to best prepare our entryways, external areas and internal spaces for the return of our congregants and those we connect with that will be new to our churches whom we reached through virtual church and community care.
- Sanitize pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, water fountains, light switches, and microphones. Provide access to sanitizing wipes so folks can wipe down spaces with which they come in contact.
- Pay special attention to the nursery/preschool/children's areas. While it will be some time before these spaces are open again for use, this level of care is deeply appreciated by families. Use this time to remove worn/broken toys and other clutter. If these projects require teams, maintain physical distancing, mask-wearing, shift work, etc.
- Make and post signs about not shaking hands, physical distancing, and doing non-contact greetings. Post reminders and ways of practicing safe distancing at all entrances and throughout your building. Place these reminders above water fountains, in restrooms and other high traffic areas.
- Communicate these happenings to your congregation and community. Whether through facebook, email, flyers on doors/windows, a letter to the editor—tell your congregation and community how you are preparing the church for their return.

For guidelines on cleaning specific surfaces, [visit these CDC recommendations.](#)

Questions for Church Leadership to Consider Before Reopening:

- Has our insurance company offered benchmarks for reopening or best practices? How will these benchmarks influence any decisions moving forward?
- Assuming that an online streaming option continues once in person worship resumes, what will you need to do to make this happen? What technology/equipment/staffing is needed?
- How many people can your worship space hold if you are worshipping in family groups sitting 6 feet apart?
- How will you discourage the receiving line after church and/or congregating after worship services?

- When in earlier phases of relaunch, how will you cap attendance at events so there is room for members of the community to join you and so you don't go over guidelines?
- How can you encourage small group gatherings in the earlier phases of relaunching? How might you continue these when in-person worship resumes?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection in regards to communal spaces?
 - Areas where small groups gather during the week
 - Nurseries and/or playgrounds
 - Pews or chairs following worship
 - Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building
- Do you have a back-up plan in the case that your custodial staff becomes sick?
- How will you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?
- If someone contracts COVID-19, how will you communicate with your congregation and members who may have come into contact with that individual while maintaining privacy and pastoral care?
- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?
- How will you communicate your safety plan and best practices to the congregation?

Encouragements for Pastors and Church Staff:

- Pastors, staff and leaders must realize we are in this for the long haul, rather than rising to meet an emergency/crisis.
- Pastors, staff and leaders must model healthy boundaries (regular times to unplug, regular days off, ability to unplug, etc.)
- Pastors, staff and leaders must tend to their own mental, emotional and spiritual needs.
- Leaders are encouraged to connect with counselors, spiritual directors and/or coaches. Please reach out to your District Superintendent for contacts.
- Pastors, staff and leaders must intentionally connect with colleagues.

Caring for Those Most Impacted

Ultimately, in this pandemic, we have clearly seen the interdependence of all peoples. If some ever thought it could be otherwise, we now know our connection to God is never independent of our connection with marginalized community. Our work is here, at the intersection of injustice and incarnation, at the meeting point of human compassion and human need. It is here where we are all transformed, here where we find hope, and here where we meet the Christ.

To that end, we hold these actions before us as we journey forward:

- We must re-imagine our ways in Wesleyan community. Remembering our heritage, we will seek to become interactive participants in the wellness and wholeness of our communities. We work to:
 - Grow a collaborative, coordinated effort at the local level that could leverage the assets that the faith community, nonprofits, and local government can bring
 - Develop new relationships that are sustainable beyond this current crisis
 - Knit and renew existing relationships
 - Connect with formal and informal community leaders
 - Develop intercultural competency and interdenominational capacity as a movement to more fully being the Body of Christ
- Become congregations for health: body, mind, spiritual, and relationships living from our Wesleyan way and in the Way of Jesus

In Closing

It is possible that COVID-19 cases will spike, decrease, and increase again. The Cabinet and Connectional Staff will assess the threat and issue a return to the appropriately restrictive status.

Please send your questions for clarification to your District Superintendent.

This document will be regularly reviewed and updated.

Recommended Reading/Viewing

Below are resources gathered by the Wisconsin Council of Churches staff, roughly in order of urgency, from immediate understanding of this pandemic to a deeper understanding of how we might reconstruct how we do church on the other side of the pandemic.

- [Why Getting the US Back to Normal in the Next Couple Months is a Fantasy](#). *PBS NewsHour*, April 20, 2020.
- [The Coronavirus in America: The Year Ahead](#). *New York Times*, April 18, 2020.
- [COVID-19: Now I understand King's truth of the 'inescapable web of mutuality'](#), Zachary Helton, *Baptist News Global*, April 21, 2020.
- [Church in these "VUCA" Times](#). Jake Morrill.
- [24 Questions Your Church Should Ask Before People Return](#). Ken Braddy, Jr.
- [The Four Spaces of Belonging](#).

- [Leaders, It's Time to Ask Critical Questions About the Post-COVID19 Church.](#) John Thornburg, *United Methodist Insight*, April 14, 2020.
- [Distributed Church.](#) Fresh Expressions.
- [How to Seize this Moment for Your Church.](#) Ed Stetzer.

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