

Guidance for Phasing Forward to In-Person Gatherings

Updated version - May 20, 2020

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” ~ Jeremiah 29:7

This is a time unlike anything we have experienced in our lifetimes. This is a challenging time for all of us. We have had moments of creative ingenuity and moments of overwhelming exhaustion.

We entered it in chaos, we plan to move through it with intention. *We’re not reopening. Because we never closed.* We have engaged ministry in new ways. We will move forward in new ways.

First, there is no way to ensure the overall safety of our congregations and communities until there is a trusted vaccine.

Second, in person worship in sanctuaries is one of the types of gatherings that is most likely to spread the infection.

- In an enclosed room over a length of time the airborne viral particles can reach every corner. 6-foot or 12-foot physical distancing will not prevent this.
- Speaking, praying and singing aloud propels the virus even further than just breathing.
- Using masks limits but does not prevent the transmission of the disease.
- Common surfaces abound.
- We know that people can be carriers of the virus without any symptoms.

Third, we don’t know everything about this disease and its impact on all ages. New information is coming out daily. This makes it hard to predict trends, safety measures, and phases.

Fourth, our congregations are comprised of the populations most vulnerable to Covid-19.

Fifth, an outbreak in our churches impacts our communities and the capacity of our health care system.

We have been reviewing dozens of documents and websites on next steps for places of worship. This document is an integration and distilling of those resources tailored for our churches. We are presenting a phasing forward approach beginning with our current Base Phase and moving through 4 phases that are tied to local conditions and the guidance of local government and health care professionals.

There is no one date that can be universally applied across our Conference to every church and every community. Things differ; local regulations, building size and condition, age of congregation, size of congregation, health care capacity in community, rate and incidence of spread in community.

The way forward won't be linear. There is the possibility of new spikes in infection that may return us to Stay Home Stay Safe requirements.

Based on these phases and the current trends we believe in person worship in buildings will need to be suspended through at least the end of the summer.

Blessings,

Marilyn Kendrix
Don Remick
Kent Siladi

If you have a resource that you have found helpful in addressing these issues, PLEASE share with them with us. Contact Kelly Gallagher (gallagherk@sneucc.org), Tamara Moreland (morelandt@sneucc.org), or Kate Ostertag (ostertagk@sneucc.org).

Base Phase

- **Stay-at-Home Order** or non-essential business recommendation in place by your State and Local Government **AND**
- **COVID-19 case count is not currently decreasing** over a span of 2 continuous weeks

RECOMMENDED:

- **Online Worship only** - (See: Resources are on the [Worship & Nurturing Community page](#))
- **Online Meetings only** - (See: Resources on [Conducting Church Business Online](#))
- **Church Office and Building Closed completely**
- **Preparations for Phasing Forward**
 - **Continue to ask questions and plan for Phasing Forward** - see [Mid Pandemic Checklist](#)
 - **Review [CDC Covid-19 guidelines and Interim Guidance for Communities of Faith](#)**
 - **Continue to Monitor Church Maintenance:** How are you maintaining your building in this time when it is not occupied? Is someone seeing to the pipes, the organ and other necessary building concerns? - *Related:* [Buildings closed by Coronavirus face another risk: Legionnaires' disease](#)
 - **Consider and plan Requirements for Church Worship Leaders:**
 - Applies to but not limited to ministers, worship leaders, ushers, choir director, and choir members.

- Younger than 60 years old (*not required but note that the CDC has indicated that this age group is at a higher risk for infection*)
 - Without auto-immune challenges
 - Willing to wear gloves and mask and observe physical distancing
 - Willing to have temperature taken before worship
- **Develop your Plan for Returning to In-Person Worship including:**
 - Physical space – See: [Recommendations for In-Person Worship](#)
 - Non-contact worship - See: [Liturgical Considerations](#) (addresses each aspect of the service)
 - Estimate required PPE for worshipers and begin procuring
 - Estimate required purchases to implement non-contact worship, cleaning and touch free facility navigation
- **Develop your plan for Youth, Sunday School and Faith Formation**
See: [Questions to Address Before Resuming On-Site Faith Formation Programming](#)
- **Appoint an Administrator or Task Team** to implement the guidelines and provide support to staff and volunteers
- **Institute a Protocol Program** for essential staff and lay leaders on how to clean and sanitize as well as products to use and safe use of the products (insert template). Include planned refresher sessions on changes to policies and procedures
- **Develop Church Health Policies and Screening Practices** such as:
 - Whether or not to require touch free temperature checks prior to in-person worship
 - Weekly and Daily health check: Weekly ask worshipers, and daily ask staff to confirm they have not experienced COVID-19 CDC-defined symptoms and to monitor their own symptoms. (See the [CDC's Symptoms Checklist](#))
- **Confirm action in the event of a positive COVID-19 case:** How will you encourage worshipers to inform their faith leaders and follow state guidelines and protocols as they relate to quarantine and contact tracing? Who will decide and implement next steps?
- **Develop cleaning plans** and checklists that incorporate these guidelines. Ensure it is clear which faith leaders, staff, worshipers and any users of the facility are responsible for implementing the plans. Resources Coming Soon
 - **Include a complete deep-clean** of facility before reopening and include entrances, lobbies, bathrooms, kitchens, hallways, elevators, door handles/knobs, and all equipment (e.g. printers, scanners, phones, vending machines) desks, chairs, computers, monitors
- **Share these guidelines** with your worshipers and inform them of all measures being taken in response to Covid-19
- If preparing to enter Phase One, **plan to communicate your guidelines for worship one month in advance** of first gathering.

Phase One

- **Your church has completed all preparations during Base Phase**
- **Confirm** that your **State and Local Government** has **lifted Stay-at-Home Order or non-essential business recommendations AND**
- **Confirm with your local health agent that you meet the criteria to return to in-person worship**
 - and that **COVID-19 Case Counts in your state and local area have decreased over a minimum span of 2 continuous weeks**
 - there is **widespread availability of testing**
 - there is **No Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) shortage**
 - there is **robust Contact Tracing in place**
 - For information by state visit: covidactnow.org

RECOMMENDED:

Limited in-person worship of 15 people maximum but no greater than 10% of your total sanctuary occupancy. Maximum numbers include lay/clergy leadership and are dependent upon the on ability to maintain social distance. In person worship should continue to be **paired with online worship**. See: [Recommendations for In-Person Worship](#)

- Scheduled far enough out to finalize safe worship planning and allow for “dress rehearsal” of safe protocols.
- Follow recommendations for all In-person worship during the Covid-19 Pandemic designed to increase safety for gathering including No Singing and No Communion
- Continue holding online worship
- **Encourage those at high-risk to worship online**
- Consider holding services and gatherings in a large, well-ventilated areas, outdoors or as drive-in style - if they can be safely organized. Contact your local police and fire department in advance to confirm any local requirements.
- **IMPORTANT: If there are Covid-19 case infection increases in your county (or if any criteria named shifts) at any time or there are cases amongst your in-person worshipping community, your Church Should Immediately Close and Return to Base Phase.**
- Follow and post [CDC guidelines for hand hygiene](#)
- Follow and post [CDC guidelines for social distancing](#)
- Online Meetings only
- Church Offices remain closed

Phase Two

- A minimum of **4 continuous weeks of declining COVID-19 Case Counts in your state and local community**. There is no one in your in-person worshipping community that is exhibiting COVID-19 Symptoms **AND**
- **Confirm with your local health agent that you continue to meet the criteria for in-person worship**
 - there remains **widespread availability of testing**

- there remains **No Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Shortage**
- there is **robust Contact Tracing in place**
- **AND the Stay-at-Home Order or non-essential business recommendations remain lifted**

For information by state visit: covidactnow.org

RECOMMENDED:

In-Person Worship of 25 people maximum but no greater than 20% of your total sanctuary occupancy. Maximum numbers include lay/clergy leadership and are dependent upon the on ability to maintain social distance. In person worship should continue to be **paired with online worship**. A rehearsal of new larger service protocols should be held in advance of first increase in attenders. See: [Recommendations for In-Person Worship](#)

- Follow recommendations for all In-person worship during the Covid-19 Pandemic designed to increase safety for gathering including No Singing and No Communion
 - Continue holding online worship
 - **Encourage those at high-risk to worship online**
 - Consider holding services and gatherings in a large, well-ventilated areas, outdoors or as drive-in style - if they can be safely organized. Contact your local police and fire department in advance to confirm any local requirements.

IMPORTANT: If there are Covid-19 case infection increases in your county (or if any criteria named shifts) at any time or there are cases amongst your in-person worshipping community, your Church Should Immediately Close and Return to the Base Phase.

- Follow and post [CDC guidelines for hand hygiene](#)
- Follow and post [CDC guidelines for social distancing](#)
- **Online Meetings only**
- **Church Offices remain closed**
- **Determine facilities usage** (meetings, outside groups rentals) and additional sanitization for your facility during future phases

Phase Three

- A minimum of **8 continuous weeks of declining COVID-19 Case Counts in your state and local community**. There is no one in your in-person worshipping community that is exhibiting COVID-19 Symptoms **AND**
- **Confirm with your local health agent that you continue to meet the criteria for in-person worship**
 - there remains **widespread availability of testing**
 - there remains **No Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Shortage**
 - there is **robust Contact Tracing in place**
 - For information by state visit: covidactnow.org
- **The Stay-at-Home Order or non-essential business recommendations remain lifted**

RECOMMENDED:

In-Person Worship 50 people maximum but no greater than 30% of your total sanctuary occupancy. Maximum numbers include lay/clergy leadership and are dependent upon the on ability to maintain social distance. In person worship should continue to be **paired with online worship**. A rehearsal of new larger service protocols should be held in advance of each increase in attenders. See: [Recommendations for In-Person Worship](#)

- Follow recommendations for all In-person worship during the Covid-19 Pandemic designed to increase safety for gathering including **No Singing** and **No Communion**
- Continue holding online worship
- **Encourage those at high-risk to worship online**
- Consider holding services and gatherings in a large, well-ventilated areas, outdoors or as drive-in style - if they can be safely organized. Contact your local police and fire department in advance to confirm any local requirements.

IMPORTANT: If there are Covid-19 case infection increases in your county (or if any criteria named shifts) at any time or there are cases amongst your in-person worshipping community, your Church Should Immediately Close and Return to the Base Phase.

- Follow and post [CDC guidelines for hand hygiene](#)
- Follow and post [CDC guidelines for social distancing](#)
- **Evaluate** Resuming In-Person Meetings, Opening Church Offices and Use by Outside Groups (with PPE and Social Distancing) including additional sanitization for your facility when proceeding

Phase Four

- A Covid-19 vaccine is developed, provided to entire population and widespread immunity is confirmed

RECOMMENDED:

- All in-person church activities can be observed

IMPORTANT: If there are Covid-19 case infection increases in your county (or if any criteria named shifts) at any time or there are cases amongst your in-person worshipping community, your Church Should Immediately Close and Return to the Base Phase.

References:

Center for Disease Control: <https://www.cdc.gov/>

CDC Interim Guidance for Faith Based Organizations: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>

CDC guidelines for hand hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/hand-hygiene.html>

CDC Community Organization Checklist: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/checklist.html>

Covid Act Now: <https://covidactnow.org/>

Suggested Illinois Conference Phase Forward Reopening Plan for Churches

Missouri Mid-South Conference United Church of Christ - Suggested MMS Phased Reopening Plan for Churches

State Government/Board of Health Guidelines

- Connecticut: <https://portal.ct.gov/coronavirus> and <https://portal.ct.gov/DPH/Communications/Contact-Us/Contact-Us>
- Massachusetts: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-response-reporting> and <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/departement-of-public-health>
- Rhode Island: <https://health.ri.gov/covid/>

The Risks Know Them Avoid Them: <https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them>

Ken Braddy website: [24 Questions Your Church Should Answer Before People Return.](#)

[Four Phases For an Orderly Return to Church.](#)