

RETURNING TO CORPORATE WORSHIP

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.

Please understand: for at least the next year, we anticipate our lives to be shaped by the timeline set by COVID-19. We face difficult choices between conflicting needs and imperatives. But we must avoid framing our situation in terms of a false choice between reviving our church and saving lives. If we don't continue our efforts to contain the virus, a new wave of infections and deaths will cause further damage, and we will lose what we've gained from the measures already taken. If we push the envelope too far by reopening our buildings and resuming gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force on our more vulnerable members the choice between keeping themselves and others safe and participating in congregational life like everyone else.

We pray for a spirit of discernment, for wisdom, and patience. We pray for researchers and medical professionals; for the planners; for the ill and recovering; for those grieving and struggling with the weightiness of these times. We pray that God, science, and medicine guide our decisions.

CURRENT SITUATION

The following practices are to be followed:

- Churches holding online worship services only.
- Service ministries are using safety protocols and only addressing essential needs.
- Minimal, drop-in staffing sufficient for essential operations.

STEP ONE

Step One begins when certain milestones are met. In brief, we will look for two weeks of declining case counts in the State of Wisconsin, your county, and our region, widespread availability of testing, contact tracing, and no PPE shortages.

The following practices are to be followed:

- We will continue holding online worship services only.
- Funerals, weddings will be kept to less than 10 in attendance. These events will not be held within the church building. Food will not be prepared.
- Keep office functions as limited as possible to ensure essential operations.
- No building users/renters allowed back in at this time.
- Church councils and leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, or meeting online.
- **High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff or volunteers, should continue to shelter in place.**

STEP TWO

The shift from Step One to Step Two is based on a re-evaluation of the situation using the original criteria. You might expect several weeks of improving conditions to pass before this shift. This will require careful observance of physical/social distancing recommendations on an ongoing basis.

The following practices are to be followed:

- Worship online will continue 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.
 - Worshipers will be required to wear cloth face masks while at church and temperature will be taken at every service.
 - Offering Communion safely will be a challenge, as touching a face mask (to remove or shift it) contaminates it. This may mean we will need to further postpone offering Communion to the faithful.

- No singing during worship. Singing is among the riskier behaviors when it comes to spreading droplets/aerosols which can carry the virus a significant distance and remain suspended in the air.
- No passing the peace, no passing the offering plate. Hymnals and Bibles will be removed.
- Distancing: Have people spread out in sanctuary space with one family unit distancing themselves in the pews and keep empty pews between families.
- No fellowship/coffee hour.
- **Encourage people to leave the building rather than mingling.**
- Funerals and weddings could take place in the building in a more traditional way, with careful attention to guest lists so as to keep the number under the 35 people, with physical distancing, no food serviced, and all in attendance wearing a mask.
- Small Groups:
 - No 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.
- Church Business
 - Regular office functions would resume while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks. Continue to attend to cleaning and sanitizing the office. Pay particular attention to high-touch surfaces.
 - Session and Committees of less than 10 could meet in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, or meeting online.
 - No building users/renters allowed back in at this time.
- 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.
 - If you become aware of someone in the church or a building user infected with COVID-19, put your communication plan into action, and cooperate fully with contact tracers.
- **High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff, volunteers, or worship participants, should continue to shelter in place.**

STEP THREE

The shift from Step Two to Step Three is based on a re-evaluation of the situation using the original criteria. You might expect several more weeks of improving conditions to pass before this shift. 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. We encourage careful hygiene, following of the physical/social distancing recommendations; continue the wearing of masks, encouraging people to stay at home if they have any symptoms of illness, and to cooperate with contact tracers if they are diagnosed.

The following practices are to be followed:

- **High risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff, volunteers, or worship participants, should continue to shelter in place during Step Three.**
- Wear cloth face masks while at church and continue doing temperature checks.

- Worship:
 - The church will offer in-person and online options.
 - Physical distancing is not required by Step Three. We will avoid crowding in the sanctuary and other public places to the extent possible.
 - Watch for public health recommendations on Communion at this step.
 - Watch for public health recommendations on group singing as we arrive at this step.
 - No passing the peace, no passing of the offering plate. Hymnbook and Bibles will remain absent from the worship space until cleared to sing.
 - No fellowship/coffee hour.
 - **Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.**
- Office functions could resume as normal, with attention to cleaning.
- Groups, teams, and committees could meet in person.

Questions for Church Leadership to Consider

It is recommended that you work through these questions before re-launch:

- Has your insurance company weighed in on benchmarks for reopening, and for operating any programs? Your judicatory leader (Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly)? How will these influence your decision?
- Will you maintain an online streaming option once you are back together worshipping in physical space? How will that need to adjust when there is also in-person worship happening?
- 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 re-launch, 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 will you ensure sanitation and disinfection in regards to communal spaces?
 - Disposing of the byproducts of the worship service (bulletins, Kleenexes etc.).
 - Acquiring cleaning supplies (wipes, hand sanitizer, Clorox, etc.).
 - Pews or chairs cleaned following worship
 - Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building
- 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?