



Illinois South Conference Faithfully Phasing Forward

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”
~ Jeremiah 29:11*

Even when it does not seem clear what tomorrow will bring, we need to plan ahead seeking God’s wisdom and guidance.

For the last nine weeks, we in the Illinois South Conference have been following the stay at home orders of our state and paying close attention to the recommendations of the CDC, as well as local and national health care professionals.

Our churches adapted quickly to staff working remotely from home and offering worship, faith formation, spiritual care, and fellowship in new ways. Pastors and worship leaders immersed themselves into new forms of helping members still feel connected by using online platforms, phone calls and even letters. Many church members have bravely learned a new language of technology. We have been practicing good physical distancing to reduce the risk of spreading the COVID 19 virus, while seeking to remain spiritually close and connected.

While at first, many felt the adrenaline rush of seeing God *“doing a new thing”* among us. Now perhaps they just feel tired, wondering like the psalmist *“how long, O Lord?”*

How long...will we have to continue to suspend in-person worship services and church sponsored activities?

How long...will we continue to struggle with the gap between those who have access to computers, smart phones, tablets, the Internet and those who do not?

How long...will we continue to talk about this crisis and have to filter new information and new realities?

How long...will we continue to erase special in-person events and gatherings off our calendars?

How long...will we be dealing with this sense of uncertainty, change, and loss?

How long...will we continue like this? When will we be able to return to normal, back to the way things were before this crisis?

The question of *“how long?”* is preoccupying our minds, our spirits and our conversations these days. There are no easy answers to most of these questions.

However, we must be willing to face a reality we may have denied up to this point. We will not be returning to the way things were for a long time, if ever. We have and will continue to enter into new states of normal.

Yes, there will be a time when people will gather again in our church buildings for worship, for meetings, for special occasions or gatherings, but it will not be (and should not be) in the same way we did before COVID 19. As health officials have reminded us repeatedly until there is a vaccination, the risk of infection remains.

Currently, the stay at home orders in the state of Illinois remain in effect until May 30, 2020. This may or may not be extended. These orders may also be lifted for a time and then put back in place. The truth is we just do not know.

Even if the stay at home orders are not extended this does not mean “the gates of the city” per se will be opened wide. It will be a phasing back to see what works and what does not work. Out of deep care for you and your congregation, we in the Illinois South Conference strongly recommend that the leadership of your church move slowly, prayerfully and intentionally in making good decisions about how you will instill good practices and procedures for the time when people will gather again in your church.

As we have sought to do up until this point, your Conference seeks to share best practices and provide as many resources as possible as you and your congregations begin to consider what is next.

We have done our best to include some important questions for consideration when making decisions, as well as some resources and good practices to consider.

We encourage you to continue to check [our website](#), the [Illinois Department of Public Health](#), and the [Centers for Disease Control](#) for up to date information.

QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FAITHFULLY PHASING FORWARD

A Spiritual and Emotional Check Up

- Check in with each other about how pastors, worship leaders, church leaders, and members are doing right now.
- What have been the challenges? What have been the joys?
- What have you learned about your congregation?
- What have been occasions for rejoicing?
- What have been occasions for grieving?
- What are your leaders and members most anxious about?

Creating a Good Decision-Making Process

- Make sure many viewpoints are heard and considered.
- Make sure the interest of all the people of the church are taken into consideration, especially those who are the most vulnerable.
- Focus on the health and safety of members and friends of your congregation first.
- Gather reliable facts and information.
- Be thoughtful, prayerful, listen well, and do not rush.

- Also, be willing to change your mind and make new decisions when new information emerges or situations change.
- Keep informed about where we are in southern Illinois in terms of The Five Phases of “Reopening the State of Illinois.” **See chart on page 5**

Consider the Realities of a Phased Return

- How will you adapt and accommodate for groups of ten?
- Then, when it is recommended to do so, how will you adapt and accommodate for groups of fifty?
- Is it practical for your congregation to do the level of cleaning needed for safety?
- Will the people of your congregation be able to discipline themselves to stay distanced and observe the hygiene requirements, and if they cannot, who will be responsible for enforcing the practices? (Note: this cannot be the Pastor).
- Is there room in the church to do proper social distancing for worship services, meetings, and events?
- What about for children?
- In general, what is realistic, practical, and do-able for your church?

Small Steps

- Are there steps to take before opening for worship?
- Would committees meet in small groups, properly distanced?
- Would we take some time to hold memorial services that were postponed in the weeks while we were sheltering in place?
- Are there other phases that would be helpful before opening the building for worship?

Vulnerable Members

- What percentage of your congregation is in the high-risk population?
- Are your pastor, church staff or worship leaders in the high-risk population?
- How will you continue to make sure all people feel included and able to participate?

Music and Singing

- There is new and clear evidence that singing is actually a high-risk activity.
- How will in-person worship without congregational singing or a choir be received?

The What IF No One Wants to Think About

Even if you have plans for proper disinfecting, physical distancing and enforcing other good practices (such as wearing masks, limiting the time of exposure by shortening services and reducing the items worshipers touch), what will your church plan be if someone contracts COVID 19 at your church?

What if someone who has attended worship or a church sponsored activity becomes ill or even dies? How will you handle this reality as a congregation?

What will you do to mitigate the risk of spreading the virus and it keep it from happening again?

The Restore Illinois Five-Phase Plan Outlined by the Governor of Illinois on May 5, 2020

RESTORE ILLINOIS

A Public Health Approach To Safely Reopen Our State

Phase 1 Rapid Spread	Phase 2 Flattening	Phase 3 Recovery	Phase 4 Revitalization	Phase 5 Illinois Restored
<p>Strict stay at home and social distancing guidelines are put in place, and only essential businesses remain open.</p> <p>Every region has experienced this phase once already and could return to it if mitigation efforts are unsuccessful.</p>	<p>Non-essential retail stores reopen for curb-side pickup and delivery.</p> <p>Illinoisans are directed to wear a face covering when outside the home and can begin enjoying additional outdoor activities like golf, boating & fishing while practicing social distancing.</p>	<p>Manufacturing, offices, retail, barbershops and salons can reopen to the public with capacity and other limits and safety precautions.</p> <p>Gatherings of 10 people or fewer are allowed.</p> <p>Face coverings and social distancing are the norm.</p>	<p>Gatherings of 50 people or fewer are allowed, restaurants and bars reopen, travel resumes, child care and schools reopen under guidance from the Illinois Department of Public Health.</p> <p>Face coverings and social distancing are the norm.</p>	<p>The economy fully reopens with safety precautions continuing.</p> <p>Conventions, festivals and large events are permitted, and all businesses, schools and places of recreation can open with new safety guidance and procedures.</p>



Phase 1: Rapid Spread

Phase 2: Flattening

Phase 3: Recovery

Phase 4: Revitalization

Phase 5: Restoration

Please note that according to health officials statewide, there is a belief that most regions (to varying degrees) have been experiencing a flattening as of early May. We are not yet in recovery phase, but the May 1 executive order was amended to include worship with no more than ten gathered.

If you want to read the entire Restore Illinois plan, please [go here](#).

Good Practices for In-Person Worship and Church-sponsored Activities

The following are suggestions for consideration based on the CDC's recommendations and the Wisconsin Council of Churches' document "Returning to Church."

Sanitization and Cleaning Practices

Encourage use of flexible or virtual options whenever possible for all non-worship activities.

Encourage and provide cloth masks to be worn in the building.

Have adequate hygiene supplies, such as soap, tissues, no-touch trashcans, hand sanitizer (with at least 60 percent alcohol).

Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily, and shared objects between use.

Avoid use of items that are not easily cleaned, sanitized, or disinfected.

Ensure that ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible by opening windows and doors, using fans, and so on.

Worship Services

Continue to offer virtual worship options.

Limit the size of gatherings in accordance with the guidance and directives of state and local authorities.

If appropriate and possible, add additional services to weekly schedules to maintain social distancing at each service. Plan to sanitize surfaces in between services (such as pews, doors, doorknobs, microphones, chairs, pulpit and lectern).

Have people spread out in the sanctuary. Space with one family unit per pew; keep empty pews between families. Explore meeting in a fellowship hall or outdoors if your interior space is small.

When it is possible to gather in groups of 50, rituals such as weddings, funerals, or confirmations could take place in a more traditional way, with careful attention to guest lists so as to keep under the 50 person limit, with physical distancing plans. If attendance needs to be limited to under 50 people, consider holding the service virtually.

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. A cloth mask is unlikely to be enough to protect you or your neighbor. It is recommended against singing in the sanctuary when the congregation is gathered.

Limit the sharing of frequently touched objects. Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources. Consider removing hymnals and bibles if you will have multiple services. Use bulletins (do not reuse) or screens as alternatives.

Offering communion will continue to be a challenge, as touching a face mask (to remove or shift it) contaminates it. Give serious consideration to options that minimize contact.

Consider suspending the greeting at the doors before worship and the receiving line afterwards.

Also, consider suspending fellowship/coffee hours. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.

Small Groups and Christian Education

Continue to offer online opportunities for Bible studies and small groups to meet. When providing in-person opportunities follow the same social distancing guidelines you have implemented for worship.

Consider adding small groups. This is an opportunity to renew relationships and perhaps start some small groups within your congregation. New needs have arisen in this moment. Consider offering opportunities to provide spiritual and emotional support to one another.

Consider suspending summer Sunday School and in-person Vacation Bible School. It is difficult enough for adults to get used to new habits of wearing masks and staying 6 feet apart. 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, mission trips will 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? Imagine the mission field that is in your community. Keep your groups small so as not to overwhelm the ministries you serve.

If food is offered at any event, have pre-packaged boxes or bags for each attendee whenever possible, instead of a buffet or family-style meal.

Avoid offering food when it is being shared from common dishes.

Pastoral Care

Continue to have clergy hold virtual visits (by phone or online) instead of in homes or at the hospital except for certain compassionate care situations, such as end of life.

Continue to be in contact with hospitals, nursing homes, and funeral homes about their policies and procedures.

Church Business

Regular office functions could resume more or less safely while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks. However, continue to encourage high-risk individuals (people over 60 and those with underlying conditions), whether staff, volunteers, or program participants, to work remotely and shelter in place.

Continue to attend to cleaning and sanitizing the office. Pay particular attention to high-touch surfaces and cleaning hands after dealing with the offering.

Church governing boards (council/consistory) and ministry teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, or continue meeting online.

Smaller churches (under 50 members) could consider holding in-person congregational meetings if official business is required and physical distancing is practical.

Contact the Conference about proper voting procedures when in-person meetings are not possible.

If possible and appropriate, building users/renters could resume operations, with a plan to address cleaning needs and agreement to observe gathering and distancing protocols.

General Building Considerations

Contact your insurance provider immediately to talk through the implications of reopening your 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 congregation or a building user infected with COVID-19, before making decisions or statements make sure to contact the health department and the Conference right away. You will need assistance and support to guide you through the proper process of next steps in terms of communication, shutting down the building, disinfecting, and the work health officials will need to do with your full cooperation in terms of documentation, reporting and tracking the virus.

Planning Ahead for the Rest of 2020 and into 2021

Just as the Conference is looking ahead, creating contingency plans for 2020 and 2021 Conference sponsored events, we encourage you to do the same. For example, in regards to our Annual Meeting in the fall, accepting we may not be able to safely gather in-person even at that time, we are creating a Plan A and a Plan B, which will include virtual options.

Consider upcoming special events such as church anniversaries, farewell celebrations, large fellowship events, or even fundraisers that include the community. Develop contingency plans of how you might adapt and enhance these events.

Although this is quite a bit of information, it is certainly not an exhaustive list. If this moment has taught us nothing else, it is things will arise for which we were not prepared. One of the blessings of being a church in the United Church of Christ, being connected to the denomination, is you are not alone.

The national setting of the United Church of Christ and your Conference is deeply committed to walking and working alongside you to provide the resources you need to do good, effective ministry. We know in this moment doing good, effective and SAFE ministry is a challenge. However, remember we are here to help. If we do not have answers to your questions, we will seek to direct you to someone who might.

We believe God has a future for all of us. It might not be a future we imagined, but it is future in which the work and ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ presses on.

Together in Christ's ministry with you,

Dr. Jill Baker, Conference Moderator

Rev. Christy Eckert, Conference Vice-Moderator

Mr. Dwight Asselmeier, Conference Treasurer

Rev. Ivan Horn, Conference Secretary

Rev. Shana Johnson, IL South Conference Minister

Rev. Rosemary Captain

Ms. Virginia Ilch

Rev. R.J. Morgan

Rev. Mike Southcombe

Ms. Barbara VanAusdall