



As Congregations Consider Re-Opening Their Buildings for Worship

An evolving resource from the national setting for congregations of the United Church of Christ

Isaiah 43:5 Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from west.



Dear Church,

We will hold the hope of gathering again, one with another. In these days, it may be helpful to reframe our understanding of Extravagant Welcome to be Extravagant Care and Protection. We value life and are our neighbors' keepers. In that, the Church commits itself to taking actions to protect and preserve health. As much as folk long to come together for a postponed "Easter," the next several months will entail a gradual ability to gather with significant changes to "how we've always done it." It is important to remember that there are no absolute safe ways to gather in mixed groups, only safer ways. Plans must take seriously the continuum of risk involved. Life

¹ Image description: a handwritten note in front of a wooded background that reads: "#22; Dear Everybody - We MUST travel the road that's before us rather than the road we WISHED we had. And, My God, that's HARD. There are just some decisions we CANNOT yet make and our anxiety serves us not. We will know when we know so...let it be. Love, Your Pastor P.S. WASH YOUR HANDS!!!" Photo Credit: Rev. Leah Robberts-Mosser; used with permission.

with Covid-19 is challenging society in many unanticipated ways, and the Church is not exempt from that. And yet, the Church continues, adapts, reimagines, and engages in faithful ministry even in this time. While our buildings may be closed, the Church is wide open!

One place to begin is by acknowledging that these days are full of grief. For losses of life and livelihoods, for losses of touch and connection, for cancelled plans and for a future that will be changed beyond what we can imagine, there is grief. Our sacred traditions of communion, baptism, funerals, and weddings are being reimagined for times of sheltering in place, and that change is hard. Worship, with choral and congregational singing, hugs, fellowship, and so much else shared in close proximity has been transformed to screen, telephone, and text. These have been a good and necessary changes. Churches are learning now that many worship practices are among the riskiest, the most likely to spread the virus, and even with the use of masks and attention to physical distancing, congregations cannot yet safely resume these activities. How shall we gather again in the face of so much grief and loss and change?

The national leadership of the United Church of Christ, in [a pastoral letter](#) to the Church dated May 19, 2020, has urged congregations considering a return to in-person worship to “wait until ALL safety concerns have been addressed.” Given the wide disparity of COVID cases and state practices, congregations are also encouraged to receive the guidance from their Conferences and Associations as front-line resources best-suited to their context. Many conferences have or will offer resources on a phased approach to return to worship in sanctuaries. Additionally, there is strong encouragement to consider the health and safety of church staff in making decisions. For example, among active (non-retired) ministers in the United Church of Christ, [51.7% are over the age of 60](#), and thus in a higher-risk category. Church musicians, office staff, cleaning staff, and others may be at risk even in some of the later phases of reopening. The congregation must consider how to be a just and compassionate calling body and employer during this season. Additionally, churches should consult with their insurance providers to ensure compliance with any policy requirements in this process. The Insurance Board has a number of resources available [here](#); of particular interest may be the [COVID-19 Liability FAQ](#).

In the words of the Rev. Kerri Parker, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, “We always need to consider what is possible (legally), what is prudent, and what is pastoral - especially for the most vulnerable folk we serve.” (This metric - Possible, Prudent, and Pastoral - is explored deeply in a recent webinar hosted by Justice and Local Church Ministries entitled [The Science of Return](#).) The national

setting gratefully acknowledges the [work of the Missouri Mid-South Conference](#), from which the majority of the technical recommendations that follow have been drawn. This resource offers not only some of the technical “possible and prudent” recommendations, but also the pastoral elements of discernment in which a congregation must engage as they consider when and how to reopen.

Consistent with conference resources, the national setting of the United Church of Christ offers a phased-reentry plan as a MINIMUM threshold for consideration of moving towards a return to physical worship in sanctuaries and church buildings, and seeks to address ways to minimize risk while acknowledging that there is no way to guarantee complete safety. This outline assumes that there is widespread availability of testing and no shortage of PPE in all phases.² Until such testing and PPE are widely available, churches remain in Phase 1.

When worship begins to happen in church buildings (or outside), physical distancing measures must be practiced at all times, including practices such as: one family unit per pew, at least one full pew separating family units to achieve appropriate 6-foot distancing (and roping off pews to ensure this is practiced); ability to maintain physical distancing before, during, and after worship services; face masks required for all attending worship in person; no singing in worship, and no woodwind instruments used in worship; no physical-touch rituals (handshakes, hugs, kiss of peace, etc.); no fellowship time, Sunday School, Children’s Church, or nursery care; no offering plate usage or Communion plate or intinction; and no in-person small group meetings. Plans for deep cleaning the building between worship services (including multiple services on the same day) must be developed and adhered to; this includes the sanctuary, bathrooms, and any other shared space. Those at high risk for contracting COVID-19 are encouraged to worship online whenever possible.

- **Phase 1 (stay at home orders from state, county, or city):** Online worship and meetings with church buildings completely closed.
- **Phase 2 (2 weeks of consistently declining COVID case counts in your state, county, or city):** Limited in-person worship with a maximum of 10 people, paired with online worship; online meetings.
- **Phase 3 (4 weeks of consistently declining COVID case counts in your state, county, or city):** Limited in-person worship with maximum of 25 people, paired with online worship.

² With gratitude to the Wisconsin Council of Churches, whose [resource](#) on re-opening has informed many other resources, and to the Missouri Mid-South Conference, whose May 1, 2020 document on phased re-opening is paraphrased here.

- **Phase 4 (8 weeks of consistently declining COVID case counts in your state, county, or city):** Limited in-person worship with a maximum of 50 people, paired with online worship. Limited fellowship food might be acceptable at this phase.
- **Phase 5 (Vaccine developed and shared with the entire population):** All church activities can be observed only after a vaccine has been developed and is widely provided to the entire population of a community.

****Should COVID counts increase in your county at any time, return to Phase 1.****

While the above outline takes into consideration the concerns about physical safety, there are also theological and spiritual questions that remain. The national setting encourages churches to reflect on these questions at every phase of re-opening:

What practices of lamentation do we need to offer as we prepare to gather again in person? Given the sheer volume of loss of life, how will the Church tend to grieving hearts in the absence of our well-practiced rituals surrounding death? What memorial services have been deferred, and how will the lives of the faithful departed be honored?

- We encourage congregations not to rush to celebration, but to hold space for grief, lamentation, and loss to be felt and experienced together. Deferred memorial services may take considerable time and energy over the phases of reopening. An All Saints Service, even if not held on the first Sunday in November, may be a faithful way to honor those who have died during this pandemic, is appropriate.
- A return to former practices of in-person soul-tending in times of grief may not be possible, even after a return to in-person worship. The church is encouraged to care for the grieving and the ill in ways that attend to their spiritual health as well as their physical safety. This will be done in a variety of ways. Congregations with Stephens Ministry program or Called to Care leaders may find that calling or video-chatting with individuals and families may continue to be appropriate moving forward.

How shall the Church make room for the reality that many will be absent, not because of illness or death but because it is not yet safe for them to be in public? How shall the Church care for those who remain quarantined after the lifting of many social distancing requirements? Now that we know that prior to this pandemic our in-person gatherings excluded certain folk with medical needs, how shall we

make provision to continue to offer hospitality and worship to all those who are unable to gather in person for worship?

- We encourage the continued use of digital worship as an integral part of a congregation's worship experience, even after a congregation begins to worship in person. This will require the continued creativity and flexibility of pastoral leadership as well as others. Consider how a worship team or committee can contribute to curating digital worship; this tends to the safety of those who are unable to be physically present and reminds the whole Church that at any one time, their congregation might be simultaneously gathered and scattered.
- Congregations are seeing increased engagement in worship, strong numbers of visitors and far-away members (and former members); how can a congregation continue to invite these persons into the common life of the church?

How shall the Church adapt its rituals of worship to minimize the further spread of disease? When singing is known to spread COVID-19 faster and farther than speaking or humming, how shall the faithful "sing to the Lord a new song"? When passing the peace is a well-loved practice, how shall the Church cultivate new, physically distanced practices, that offer the same meaning? When passing an offering plate or Communion elements may endanger some, how do we make room for receiving the financial gifts of the community? When sacraments like Communion and baptism may create further risk, how does the Church receive these "outward signs of invisible realities" and welcome newcomers into the life and faith of the community?

- We encourage a wide range of practices that convey love from a safe distance. This might look like new greetings with arms crossed over hearts, or hands in a praying posture.
- This is the time to solidify the practices of online and direct giving from financial institutions.
- From the National Association of Teachers of Singing, the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), Chorus America, Barbershop Harmony Society, and Performing Arts Medical Association (PAMA), along with specialists in otolaryngology and infectious disease, with specific research focus on aerosolizing of particles from the lungs through the vocal tract, including the mouth and nose: this webinar offered some sobering information, including the fact that no mask is currently safe for singing. Because of this, we cannot endorse singing in worship until Phase 5 of this pandemic.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3RTRRnb8B8XlloeQ5Hlw7cDsYtO6KZ4lwS915Hb1cZrEySdaPSUm3AMBk&app=desktop>.

- It will be important to talk through the intention behind the sacraments and explore alternatives to receiving communion in person and celebrating baptism as a community. We trust that the Spirit of the Living God is with us and among us, no matter the distance between us, and we recognize that we can celebrate communion at every meal. And then, we might ask, how can we connect to the body of Christ outside of a sanctuary? How can we welcome new life into our family of faith in an intentional way for now, and then plan to come together at a later time?

How shall the Church offer fellowship and community when events like community meals, potlucks, or even coffee hours, are not yet safe experiences?

- We encourage finding creative ways to have touchless sharing of food. This might look like dropping meals off on doorsteps, sharing fellowship time online while eating in our individual homes, or meeting online for coffee. Churches with meal programs have carefully navigated gloved and masked preparation with individual food preparers at a safe distance from each other.

We are a people of faith, not a people bound by marketplace values and expediency. We are a people mindful of inclusion and protection of the vulnerable in our midst. We are open to the possibility of transformation, of hope that new life, justice and deeper love are possible through this crisis. We encourage congregations to reflect on these questions as invitations to dig more deeply into their core beliefs.

- What practices of faithful resistance from our history can we draw upon as we learn to Be the Church in new ways? (Think about the history of the whole Church as well as the history of one's own congregation.)
- What age-old, steadfast acts of faith and service can we reclaim to help others who are awash in grief, who hunger and thirst, who need safe places to rest, who are sick? What new practices are we being called to take up?
- How are we attentive to federal and state guidelines for loosening social distancing requirements as a baseline for our consideration of re-opening our doors? How are we attentive to the wisdom shared from our Conference and Association staff?
- Whose advice are we also tending to lessen not only moral risk, but also legal risk?
- For whom are we praying today, and from whom do we seek prayers today?

We are a people of justice and of compassion. As we live into new ways of being and doing Church, we have responsibilities to pastoral leadership and other staff. We

encourage congregations to reflect on these questions as individuals and as a whole community, tending to the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of its leadership:

- How can we support our church's pastoral leadership in the midst of difficult decision-making? Where can we assume best intentions, when is it appropriate to voice our concerns, and how can we use this time for a season of discernment and prayer in order that the congregation might draw closer to one another?
- How can we equip our pastor(s) to tend to their own self-care, and that of their family?
- How might the congregation show its care for pastoral and staff leadership (in some visible, tangible ways) as all this change continues? How can we be a just and compassionate calling body and employer in this season?

We are an Easter people. In the midst of all the lamentation and sorrow for which we must make room, we are still moved to praise the Living God, to give thanks for the ways made out of no-ways, for the present and future possibilities that will call forth our creativity and deeper faithfulness, and for the call to discipleship from Christ. Blessings to you in these days. May you know the power of Christ's presence, the soothing of the Spirit, and the love of our Creator.