



Great Plains United Methodist
Best Practices for Returning to our Houses of Worship
from your Congregational and Clergy Excellence Staff

Revised May 11, 2020

The Time to Prepare Is Now

The journey ahead of us will not only be based on a proposed timeline, but also on our faithfulness as we discern the signs of what lies before us. A future we live into is not only dictated by the presence of COVID-19 in our churches and in our communities but also through the non-anxious leadership from pastors and lay leaders of churches in every corner of the Great Plains Conference. We as leaders will need to consider ways to avoid creating harm from moving too quickly, and the future consequences that may come from not taking the time to think through new practices.

We are a great network of strong communities of faith who impact our local contexts with the witness of Christ. As we begin to look ahead and consider federal, state and local loosening of the standards for gathering together, we want to provide some guidelines for how to begin face to face participation when that time is right in your context which can reduce the liability for the church.

Guidelines for Gathering

General Considerations

This document is intended to provide general guidelines. The COVID-19 pandemic is a rapidly evolving situation and the outbreak status varies by location. When making decisions, each congregation must be familiar and comply with federal guidance (from sources such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Department of Labor (DOL) etc.), state and local directed health measures, executive orders, health department guidelines, and/or local orders or guidelines. Each state, county, or local municipality may have different requirements for gatherings or church services which may need to be implemented. Each church should follow the strictest directives issued by federal state, or local authorities and choose to err on the side of safety, caution, and protection. Each congregation should also recognize that guidance is constantly changing and should be consulted regularly, and changes made accordingly.

So long as a church is following the strictest directives, it should be no more exposed to liability than any other establishment that is open to the public and doing business in a responsible manner.

- Create a team to consider whether worship should begin again in the sanctuary. It could include (in addition to the pastor):
 - a member of the Administrative Council/Board and Trustees
 - a person or two who among the more vulnerable
 - the choir director and/or other musician
 - a local medical professional (doctor or nurse), whether or not a member of the church
 - Another staff person
- Develop a written plan of restrictions and expectations which will be distributed to the congregation in advance of returning to in-person worship services.
- Recommend that all persons attending worship will be required to wear cloth masks as recommended by the CDC. Members who decline to wear masks should be invited to attend services online instead of in-person.

Worship

- Continue holding online worship as you have been as many who are most vulnerable will not want to be in a community gathering. Recognize that your pastor may be one of those in the most vulnerable category.
- Record or live stream worship from the Sanctuary, maintaining appropriate distancing of 6 feet between worship leadership.
- If the church decides to hold onsite worship, give permission to (and encourage) those who are most vulnerable to stay home for their health. Remember that your pastor may have health risks that make him/her more vulnerable if exposed to the virus, as this decision about in-person worship is made.
- If you decide to hold worship at the church, determine: 1) how many persons can be seated with a minimum of 6 feet between persons (side to side and front to back) and, 2) how many services will you need to have.
- Mark the place for individual people and/or households to sit on each pew with tape or other clear indicators.
 - OR use your fellowship hall and mark on the floor where chairs are to be set.
 - OR encourage households to watch online and worship together.
 - OR meet outdoors, observing recommended guidelines.
- Restrict access to areas of the church other than the Sanctuary and closest bathrooms. If possible, prop doors open to avoid unnecessary contact with door handles. Restrict access to drinking fountains and place signs indicating they are out of order.
- Encourage all vulnerable members (older members, those with underlying health conditions, etc.) to stay home and worship via online services. Encourage those most comfortable with online worship to stay home to allow space for visitors.
- Remove all items (hymnals, prayer books, paper, and pencils) from the pews including pew pads, if possible. If needed, have bulletins placed in the pews beforehand (by

someone who has washed their hands first). Consider using a projector to avoid bulletins altogether.

- Congregational singing is discouraged as droplets/aerosols are spread even more widely. Soloists, song leaders, etc. need to sing from the back of the chancel area putting the greatest distance between them and the congregation.
- If needed, schedule which worship service people will attend.
- Suspend use of the nursery because of the difficulty of sanitizing all surfaces and items.
- Celebrate the new births, weddings, significant anniversaries, graduations, and other celebrations that have happened since early March.
- Recognize those families who have lost loved ones and are still grieving and lift them up in prayer.

Sacraments

- Communion
 - Suspend the practice of Holy Communion until distancing restrictions are lifted; or
 - If your congregation decides that communion cannot be set aside for now, servers need to wear gloves and masks; people stand 6 feet apart as they come forward; servers hand bread to the congregants; juice is served in small individual cups. Or the elements should be distributed by the properly gloved and masked ushers while congregants remain seated.
- Baptism
 - Encourage families to wait for baptisms so that the family can all be present.
 - If a family insists, then only the parents and siblings of the child can be present so as not to prevent regular worshipers from being able to be present.
 - Live stream and/or record for the family who cannot attend in person.
 - Parents keep appropriate distance from the pastor and baptismal font.

Entering and exiting the church

- Have the door to the building propped open, or one person at the door who holds it open as people arrive.
- Require all persons attending worship wear cloth masks as recommended by the CDC. Have masks available to distribute as people enter the building. Members who decline to wear masks should be invited to watch services online instead of in-person.
- Have someone at the door counting to know when you have reached the maximum number of attendees. Plan in advance for potential overflow.
- When people enter, welcome them and hand an attendance record card to them with place for names, address, email, and phone number
 - Have people use their own pen or pencil, or be sure to have enough on hand for each writing utensil to be used only by one person each week

- Cards should be completed before entering the sanctuary and placed in a basket or other receptacle before they enter. Cards should be quarantined at least 3 days before being handled.
- Follow up with visitors
- Maintain a record of attendees each week
- Should someone in the congregation be diagnosed with COVID-19 this provides a record of persons who need to be informed
- People exit the building directly from the Sanctuary, allowing for 10 seconds between people. Family groups can exit together or ushers can be called upon to dismiss individual rows.
- If possible, have one door for entering and one for exiting.
- Prohibit use of any outdoor playground area and block it off to restrict access.
- Coffee hours and fellowship time are discouraged. If coffee is provided, it should not be self-serve and cups should have lids.
- No hugs! Use waves to greet others from a safe distance.

Finances

- Instead of passing the offering plate, have the plate or baskets placed inside the Sanctuary where people walk past. If you have a woodworker, ask them to build a box with a slotted locking lid for a more secure offering receptacle.
- Encourage online giving through Vanco, another e-donation service, or the conference office. Contact Assistant Treasurer Niki Buesing at nbuesing@greatplainsumc.org or 785-414-4202 if you want to set up online donations through the Conference.
- Be sure that you are inviting and encouraging people to maintain their contributions to the church.

Weddings, funerals, confirmations

- Limit gatherings to the appropriate number allowed by the strictest directive, whether 10 or 50. Live stream and/or record for others to watch.
- Maintain appropriate social-distancing.
- Sanitize following the event if the church is used.

Between services and after the final service each week

- Sanitize all surfaces that have been touched, in accordance with CDC guidelines.
 - Be sure that you have an adequate supply of disinfectant cleaners before you begin having onsite worship.
 - Wipe or spray down pews with disinfectant.
 - Please note: It is virtually impossible to sanitize pew cushions or padded chairs adequately, so cushions should be removed.
 - Disinfect all doorknobs and any bathrooms that are available.

- Disinfect microphones that have been held and receptacles used to receive an offering.

Extra Measures You Can Take

- Consider screening congregants as they arrive, and prior to entering the church:
- Ask if they are experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms or have been exposed to someone who is. If yes, ask them to worship from home.
- Ask if they have had a positive COVID-19 test in the past 14 days. If yes, and have not received a negative test, or it has not been 14 days since the positive test, ask them to worship from home.
- Take temperatures. Ask anyone with a fever of 100.4 or higher to worship from home.
- Direct congregants not to attend worship in person if they fall into any category identified in accordance with federal and local guidelines, including if they:
 - Have tested positive for COVID-19 within the past 14 days.
 - Have been exposed to or are residing with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 within the past 14 days.
 - Are experiencing or have experienced symptoms such as a cough, fever of 100.4 or higher, sore throat, or shortness of breath within the past 14 days.
 - Have traveled internationally or to an area with widespread transmission of COVID-19 within the past 14 days.
 - Are at higher risk for severe illness. Based on currently available information and clinical expertise, the CDC identifies **older adults** and **people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions** might be at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. See: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>

Questions for Church Leadership to Consider

- Has your insurance company weighed in on benchmarks for re-opening, and for operating any in-house programs?
- Are you following the strictest recommendations of the CDC and state or county guidelines?
- As we move through state and local guidance and restrictions, how will you limit attendance at worship and other events?
- How will you guide small group gatherings that have been on-line? Do you encourage them to continue their on-line presence or encourage them to come back to the facility?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection of communal spaces following worship, small groups, or meetings?
- How will you update your building usage agreements after COVID-19?

- If someone who has been in your building contracts COVID-19, how will you do a more intensive cleaning prior to its next use?

These guidelines are just that, guidelines that cover some of the best practices for keeping your pastor and your congregation members healthy and able to continue doing ministry. Remember that some clergy are as vulnerable to impact of this disease as are the vulnerable members of your congregation.

Workers and Volunteers

We must be sensitive to the safety and welfare of workers and volunteers. At this time, it is best to avoid volunteers if at all possible. Churches should take the following steps to protect workers, volunteers, and congregants.

- Provide gloves, masks, and hand sanitizer for workers and volunteers.
- Require workers and volunteers to use hand sanitizer or wash their hands often.
- Remind workers and volunteers to avoid touching their eyes, nose or mouth and to cover coughing and sneezing with a Kleenex which is subsequently thrown away.
- Require workers and volunteers to remain at least 6 feet away from each other and congregants.
- Provide proper disposable gloves to workers and volunteers for cleaning and disinfecting surfaces. If reusable gloves are used for cleaning, they should be used for cleaning purposes only.
- Do not allow workers or volunteers to bring in outside food or share food, dishes or utensils.
- Consider not allowing workers and volunteers to use a shared kitchen.
- Take extra precaution assigning duties for persons at higher risk.
- Advise any person to stay home in accordance with current guidance, if they:
 - Have tested positive for COVID-19 within the past 14 days.
 - Reside with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 within the past 14 days.
 - Are experiencing or have experienced symptoms such as a cough, fever of 100.4 or higher, sore throat, or shortness of breath within the past 14 days.
 - Have traveled internationally or to an area with widespread transmission of COVID-19 within the past 14 days.
- Consider whether you want to implement screening of workers or volunteers
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What to do if people in worship were exposed to COVID-19

If your church holds any gathering and you later learn someone with COVID was present, immediately contact, in this order:

1. Your county or municipal health authority (identify that entity prior to holding any in-person event);
2. Your insurance company; and
3. Your district superintendent.

Request your local health authority guide you in informing the congregation of the situation. Pastors and church leaders should avoid making statements that may be considered defamatory about any person or group in the community who has tested positive or has a high rate of infection.

The CDC has issued guidance for faith-based organizations to assist in notifying local authorities about exposure and steps to take to address exposure risk:

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/community-faith-based/faq.html>

Churches should maintain the confidentiality of medical information associated with disclosing potential COVID-19 exposure information. It is important to only inform employees, volunteers, and/or congregants of potential exposure and not specifically disclose the identity of any infected/exposed employee or congregant.

If you have questions about the guidelines for your specific community, please contact Rev. Hollie Tapley, Disaster Response Coordinator, at htapley@greatplainsumc.org.

You can also contact Rev. Nathan Stanton (nstanton@greatplainsumc.org) and Rev. Nancy Lambert (nlambert@greatplainsumc.org) for questions about content.

Resources

- The CDC has expanded the list of symptoms for COVID-19 to include these:
 - Fever
 - Cough
 - Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
 - Chills
 - Repeated shaking with chills
 - Repeated muscle pain
 - Headache
 - Sore throat

- New loss of taste or smell

Regularly check these and other applicable guidelines and directives for updates:

- The CDC guidance for Community and Faith Based Organizations is available here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>
- Consider printing applicable guidance posters available from the CDC and posting in the church in appropriate locations. Posters are available to print here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/print-resources.html?Sort=Date%3A%3Adesc>
- Refer to our Conference website for continual updates regarding church gathering guidelines and recommendations at www.greatplainsumc.org/coronavirus.

Congregations located in **Nebraska** should regularly consult the following guidance, as well as federal, state, and local directed health measures and recommendations in considering when and how to reopen and in re-evaluating those plans as necessary:

Nebraska Directed Health Measures:

- The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (NE DHHS) provides a county-by-county list of implemented measures, available at: <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/COVID-19-Directed-Health-Measures.aspx>.

- NE DHHS:
Guidelines for the Conduct of Faith-Based Services, Including Weddings and Funerals, available at: <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Documents/COVID-19-Guidelines-for-the-Conduct-of-Faith-Based-Services.pdf>.

Coronavirus – COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions For Faith-Based Communities, available at: <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Documents/COVID-19-Faith-Based-Communities-FAQ.pdf>

- The Office of Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts website:
The site contains executive orders and official press releases about COVID-19, available at: <https://governor.nebraska.gov/>.

Congregations located in **Kansas** should regularly consult the following guidance, as well as federal, state, and local directed health measures and recommendations in considering when and how to reopen and in re-evaluating those plans as necessary:

- Kansas Department of Health and Environment Churches & Faith-Based Organizations Plan to Reopen, available at: <https://www.coronavirus.kdheks.gov/240/Churches-Faith-based-Organizations>

- Ad Astra: A Plan to Reopen
Kansas: <https://www.coronavirus.kdheks.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1057/Plan-to-Reopen-Kansas-Framework-PDF---Full-Plan---4--30-20>
- Kansas Office of the Governor Frequently Asked Questions on Ad Astra: A Plan to Reopen Kansas, available at:
<https://www.coronavirus.kdheks.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1071/Reopening-FAQ-5220>
See especially page 6:
“Can churches have more than 10 people in a service at a time in Phase One? Yes, a church may have more than 10 people in a service at one time so long as individuals are more than 6 feet apart, with the exception of those who reside together, and the church is following deep cleaning and other public health guidelines.”