



West Ohio Conference

Return to Public Church Guidelines

We recognize and accept that life is not going to return to what it was before COVID-19; therefore, how we live out our mission as the church will not go back to what we have always known. We will continue to change, adapt and develop new ways of being the church.

Our return to public worship is not, and never should be, based on our own comfort, desires or preferences. It is based on our fulfilling God's mission and purpose for us, which is loving God and loving others. We believe that we are in a moment of the greatest opportunity for evangelism in recent memory. We have abundant opportunities to show those around us, even in the midst of this pandemic, that they are beloved children of God and that we love them. That love can be shown concretely through our following the practices that will best protect one another from this virus. To be faithful, we are called to be willing to do what is best for others, even when it means we must make sacrifices.

We also recognize that this will not be a one-size-fits-all approach to this startup. Those who are most vulnerable (those over 65 and/or with preexisting conditions) are encouraged to be abundantly cautious and should not be in crowds at all. Starting up in rural, less-populated areas could very well be different than in higher-density population centers. However, all of our congregations and leaders should be aware of and follow the following guidelines.

Suggested Guidelines and Considerations:

1. We will follow the directives and recommendations/orders of Gov. Mike DeWine, Dr. Amy Acton and the Centers for Disease Control. This includes the wearing of masks, safe distancing, size of gathering limitations and so forth.
2. We will follow the phased-in restart plan being presented by the governor and health officials.
 - a. *Phase 1* – No more than 10 people gathering in one place with strict distancing guidelines.
 - b. *Phase 2* – No more than 50 people gathering in one place with moderate distancing guidelines
 - c. *Phase 3* – No limitations on number of people.
3. Any person entering worship in any of the above phases must be asymptomatic. Until *Phase 3*, masks should be worn by all clergy and laity while in the building.
4. Each congregation should check with their own insurance company regarding liability on reopening too soon. What would happen if we opened before our state, local, health and denominational authorities declared it safe to gather in large groups and someone became ill after being exposed to COVID-19 in our worship service?
5. In this time, all congregations should focus on our mission and purpose and eliminate what does not directly support that missional purpose. As we reopen, we cannot do everything we were doing pre-pandemic.



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6. Worship Guidelines:

- a. When allowed to start public worship, the above phased-in plan should be strictly followed (see #2).
 - b. Safe distancing should be practiced in all seating. This may mean adding more worship opportunities when the number of worshipers exceeds the gathering limitations.
 - c. Following the guidelines for safe distancing, we should greet one another in ways that acknowledges each other without physically touching. To help make this easier, our recommendation is to avoid the tradition of passing the peace as a part of our worship.
 - d. The pastor and leaders must be examples, so, therefore, must follow these guidelines. This means that as the pastor greets those in attendance, they must do so while maintaining safe distances and without physically touching the person they are greeting. The pastor must maintain the safe-distancing guidelines and precautions.
 - e. There should be no coffee hour or fellowship times before or after worship where it is difficult to maintain safe distancing.
 - f. We must think through how to celebrate the sacraments, baptism and communion, and remain safe.
 - g. Every effort should be made to create a place for members to drop their offering into a container that will allow them to follow safety standards. Offering plates should not be passed from person to person.
 - h. Until *Phase 3*, worship services should be shortened in duration to reduce the exposure to a crowd. Children's school offerings should be suspended until *Phase 3*. All other small-group offerings should only be held where all safe-distancing guidelines, including the use of masks, can be practiced. Opportunities to have online Bible studies and online children's Sunday school should continue to be investigated and developed.
 - i. Until *Phase 3*, singing and responsive reading should not be used in liturgy. Because viruses can survive on paper and hard surfaces for hours, the use of hymnals and pew Bibles is discouraged. Consider removing all hymnals, Bibles and papers from the pews in the settings where multiple services will occur in the same space on the same day. Use of projector systems to display the words and text is strongly encouraged.
 - j. Bulletins should not be handed out. Use projector systems, social media, websites and other media for announcements and communications.
 - k. We should not offer child care or Sunday school for children until *Phase 3* of the reopening.
 - l. Restroom capacities that allow safe distancing must be thought through and posted. For example, if the restroom has four stalls, the capacity should be reduced to two people in the restroom at a time. Consider having a team to clean the handles of the restrooms after each use.
 - m. We must rethink how to deploy greeters in order to maintain safe distancing. Doors should be propped open to limit the number of times they are touched.
 - n. Every effort should be made to keep accurate attendance records in case contact tracing needs to be done. o. We must remember that even smaller groups (10 or fewer) must be aware of space/distance. Room size and ratio are important to consider when reopening buildings.
7. We must be prepared to clean and disinfect thoroughly all spaces used by people after every use. This includes, but is not limited to, door handles, light switches, pews/seats, tables, countertops and any other surface that is touched by adults or children throughout the building. Hand sanitizers and wipes should be readily available in all areas that are open for use: sanctuaries, restrooms, hallways, church office.



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8. Communication and Media Considerations:

- a. Continue to offer “low-tech” communication to members and participants who are not confident online, or where internet is unreliable.
 - i. Regular and numerous phone calls
 - ii. Stephen Ministers, or other caregivers, trained to provide care to individuals and families.
 - iii. Utilize regular letters and other print media.
- b. Every effort should be made to expand the online resources offered. We have a wonderful opportunity to connect to people with whom we may never have connected before, but we must be easily found. Please remember, once we reach *Phase 3*, there will still be people who are unable or uncomfortable to return to public worship. They are still to be cared for; therefore, we should continue with an online option.
- c. Actively teach members of your church to use Zoom or other communication/meeting online resources.
- d. We must develop more effective ways to talk to our folks about giving and be able to offer multiple ways for members and participants to give to the church.

9. Develop new partnerships and connections with colleagues and other churches in your area and our connection.

10. Self-Care, Pace, Boundaries:

- a. Pastors, staff and leaders will be watched closely in all times, but especially in times like this. We must lead by example.
- b. Pastors, staff and leaders must realize we are in this for the long haul, rather than rising to meet an emergency/crisis.
- c. Pastors, staff and leaders must model healthy boundaries (regular times to unplug, regular days off, ability to unplug, etc.).
- d. Pastors, staff and leaders must tend to their own mental, emotional and spiritual needs.
- e. Those leaders insured through the conference insurance plan should make use of the employee assistance program, or other counselors, spiritual directors and/or coaches.
- f. Pastors, staff and leaders must intentionally connect with colleagues.

Leaders will be looked to as examples of how we expect our followers to act. Therefore, it is vitally important for our leaders to follow these guidelines. This gives to us the opportunity to show compassion to our neighbors by maintaining healthy distances and proactive behaviors that will limit the exposure of others to this dangerous virus. The decisions we make must be based on our mission of loving God and loving others.