

Pandemic Re-opening Best Practices for Churches

Eastern PA Conference United Methodist Church

Written in tandem with Gov. Wolf's Re-opening Phases (Red; Yellow; Green)

Adapted with permission from the Wisconsin Council of Churches

RED PHASE:

Per Gov. Wolf:

- Stay at Home Orders in Place
- Large Gatherings Prohibited

Governor Wolf's re-opening directives (as of April 25):

<https://www.governor.pa.gov/process-to-reopen-pennsylvania/>

To this end, we recommend:

- Churches should continue holding online worship services only.
- If recording in the sanctuary, less than 10 in attendance. Maintain at least 6 ft of space between people - greater distance between those who are singing. Masks worn by all participating in planning and only removed when leading worship time.
- Life rituals (weddings, funerals) should be kept to less than 10 in attendance. If you need to help set a limit, consider using immediate family. We advise only publicizing the date and location to those who are on the approved list to prevent hurt feelings or awkward situations.
- Bible studies and small groups continue to meet online. Leadership teams meet online as much as possible.
- Keep office functions as limited as possible to ensure essential operations. Those in the office should be wearing masks; if you have more than one person in the office, make sure that surfaces, including the phone, are regularly sanitized.

YELLOW PHASE:

Per Governor Wolf:

- Stay at Home Restrictions Lifted in Favor of Aggressive Mitigation
- Large Gatherings of More than 25 Prohibited
- Child care open with workers and building safety orders
- Telework must continue where feasible

To this end, we recommend:

- Worship, depending on size:
 - Churches over 25 average worship attendance: We recommend that you continue holding online worship, recording from home or the sanctuary with participation from small groups of people. If you choose to have multiple services, have a plan for managing the number of people per service. Have a plan to clean surfaces between services. Consider exploring what small group worship could look like as an alternative.
 - Smaller churches (under 25 AWA) might consider holding in person worship but make sure their space is large enough to allow for social distancing. Have a contingency plan for overflows beyond the approved number of people.
- General recommendations for worship:
 - Whichever alternative you choose, we recommend continuing to share worship online 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.
 - Wear cloth face masks while at church, as is recommended in public spaces. Please have masks available for people upon entry if they do not arrive with one. Order or make masks now. While N95 masks are reserved for health professionals, surgical and/or cloth masks should be available. Plan now to order essential supplies like masks, hand sanitizer, disinfectant, etc.
 - Have a designated leadership team prepared with a strategy to implement these recommendations. Do not let the burden of this implementation fall on the Pastor.
 - Offering Communion safely will continue to be a challenge, as touching a face mask (to remove or shift it) contaminates it. Proximity to the communicant is a risk to the clergy/worship team and those receiving. Give serious consideration to options within your tradition that minimize contact. This may mean you need to further postpone offering Communion to the faithful.
 - 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. We recommend against singing in the sanctuary when the congregation is gathered.
 - Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources. Consider removing Hymnals and Bibles if you will have multiple services. We recommend screens over bulletins. If you must use bulletins, do not reuse.
 - Distancing: Have people spread out in sanctuary space with one family unit per pew; keep empty pews between families. Mark off chairs for individuals/families with space between (use an X to cover chairs or pews that should not be used). Explore meeting in a fellowship hall or outdoors if your space is small.
 - We recommend against offering a fellowship/coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling. Separate exits or staggered worship times may be needed if simultaneous worship is in process.
 - Life rituals (weddings, funerals, confirmations) could take place in a more traditional way, with careful attention to guest lists so as to keep under the 25 person limit, and physical distancing plans.
- Offer opportunities for Bible studies and small groups to meet in person or online. We recommend maintaining some online options for people who do not feel comfortable. Don't yet have small groups? This is an opportunity to renew relationships and perhaps start some small groups within your congregation. We know some persons have returned to church through these online means. Now is a

good time to reach out and invite these people to become active in their faith formation. As conditions shift, these small groups can provide spiritual and emotional support to one another, and offer a setting for mission.

- We recommend against offering 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. Consider whether you might offer an online or no-touch drop-off activity.
- We anticipate mission trips to 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? Practice the art of mission in place. Keep your groups small so as not to overwhelm the ministries you serve. You are there to assist, not to occupy or divert their resources.
- Regular office functions could resume more or less safely while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks. 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 councils and leadership teams of less than 10 might consider meeting in person while wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, or continue meeting online.
- Smaller churches (under 25 members) could consider holding in-person membership meetings if official business is required.
- Allow building users/renters to resume operations, with a plan to address cleaning needs and agreement to observe gathering and distancing protocols.
- 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 hightouch 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.
- Hospitals and care facilities are recommended to continue limiting visitors. This has implications for church program, pastoral care and business.
- Wear cloth face masks while at church and in community ministry, as is recommended in public spaces

GREEN PHASE

Per Gov. Wolf:

- Aggressive Mitigation Orders Lifted
- All Individuals Must Follow CDC and PA Department of Health Guidelines

To this end, we recommend:

- Worship:
 - We recommend that churches of all sizes offer in-person and remote/online options. Follow CDC guidelines.

- Physical distancing may not be required in the Green Phase, although we recommend that you avoid crowding in the sanctuary to the extent possible. Consider continuing to offer multiple services, as people may want to spread out.
- Watch for public health recommendations on Communion as we get to this phase and consult your District Office as guidelines are updated.
- Watch for public health recommendations on group singing as we arrive at this phase.
- Continue to 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.
- We will revise our recommendations as we learn more, but at this time, we recommend against offering a fellowship/coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.
- Bible studies and small groups can meet in person. We recommend maintaining some online options for high risk individuals and those who do not feel comfortable being in public.
- Office functions could resume as normal, with attention to cleaning.
- Groups, teams, and committees can meet in person.

As we approach the Yellow and Green Phase, please note the following:

“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. You can help by encouraging careful hygiene, following of the physical/social distancing recommendations, encouraging people to stay at home if they have any symptoms of illness, and to cooperate with contact tracers if they are diagnosed.” Wisconsin Council of Churches

Questions for Church Leadership to Consider

We offer this list of questions for church leadership to consider in consultation with their clergy. We recommend that you work through these questions before re-launch. We encourage a leadership team to form immediately representing all aspects of congregational life to address the local church plan for re-opening. We strongly encourage this leadership team to implement the strategies addressed above and to not let the burden of implementation fall on the Pastor.

- 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 relaunch, 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 can you encourage small group gatherings with the building of small group, discipleship systems, etc in the earlier phases of relaunching – possibly even before we move from Red to Yellow Phase? How might you continue these when in-person worship resumes?
- How will you ensure sanitation and disinfection in regards to communal spaces? Do you need to hire an outside company to help in sanitizing your building prior to re-opening?
- Plan now for Worship bulletin disposal, removal of hymnals, using screens and new options for giving (box for offerings, online giving, etc.)

- Areas where small groups gather during the week – what is your plan for meeting and sanitization
 - Nurseries and/or playgrounds
 - Pews or chairs following worship
 - Doorknobs, bathrooms, other areas that people touch when in your building
- How will you update your building use agreements to reflect the new realities of COVID-19?
- 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?

Many thanks to the Wisconsin Council of Churches for their document on re-opening and their permission for use and adaptation of their original document: <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>.

Recommended Reading/Viewing:

- Badger Bounce Back, WI Department of Health Services.
- Why Getting the US Back to Normal in the Next Couple Months is a Fantasy. PBS NewsHour, April 20, 2020.
- The Coronavirus in America: The Year Ahead. New York Times, April 18, 2020.
- COVID-19: Now I understand King's truth of the 'inescapable web of mutuality', Zachary Helton, Baptist News Global, April 21, 2020.
- Church in these "VUCA" Times. Jake Morrill.
- 24 Questions Your Church Should Ask Before People Return. Ken Braddy, Jr.
- The Four Spaces of Belonging.
- Leaders, It's Time to Ask Critical Questions About the Post-COVID19 Church. John Thornburg, United Methodist Insight, April 14, 2020.
- Distributed Church. Fresh Expressions.
- How to Seize this Moment for Your Church. Jeff Christopherson.

Recent articles regarding initial plans to reopen PA

- [Pa. to announce Friday which counties will reopen May 8; how they will be determined is still unclear](#)
- [Process to Reopen Pennsylvania, updated April 25, 2020](#)
- [More: Pa. coronavirus cases top 42,000; more than 1,700 have died of COVID-19, health department says](#)