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Presbytery of Milwaukee
Guidance for Returning to Buildings or In-person Gatherings
Re: COVID-19 (May 8, 2020)

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The following guide is for congregations considering when and how to safely return to their buildings or in-person gatherings for church related functions. This guide seeks to comply with the State of Wisconsin Badger Bounce Back Plan, the National Opening Up America Again guidelines, and best-practices recommendations by health officials. Because the virus COVID-19 will not be stopped or limited in its transmission by an arbitrary date, this guide (in accord with the others mentioned) necessitates phase-to-phase stages of return guided by gating requirements and the ability to gather data.

The gating requirements include **at each stage**:

- SYMPTOMS: Downward trajectory of influenza-like illnesses reported within a 14-day period AND downward trajectory of COVID-19-like syndromic cases reported within a 14-day period
- CASES: Downward trajectory of positive tests as a percent of total tests within a 14-day period
- HOSPITALS: Treat all patients without crisis care AND robust testing programs in place for at-risk healthcare workers, with decreasing numbers of infected healthcare workers

In addition, the State must affirm its abilities to gather the data through testing, contact tracing, and tracking, including:

- Every Wisconsin resident who has symptoms of COVID-19 can get a lab test with results reported to the patient and state or local public health within 48 hours of collection.
- Contract tracing is engaged to ensure those who have been exposed, symptomatic or not, are properly quarantined.
- A tracking system is in place to monitor the spread of the disease AND is publicly available.

The only point at which returning to "church as usual" should be considered is when a vaccine is readily available. Through each phase, "If we don't continue our efforts to contain the virus, a new wave of infections and deaths will cause further damage, and we will lose what we've gained from the measures we've already taken. And if we push the envelope too far by reopening our buildings and resuming gatherings prematurely, we may unfairly force on our more vulnerable members the choice between keeping themselves and others safe and participating in congregational life like everyone else." (Wisconsin Council of Churches)

The progression from phase to phase may not be linear. It is likely that as we return to gathering in increasing numbers there will be spikes in outbreaks necessitating returns to previous phase recommendations until cases again subside and adhere to the data guidelines. Thus, at every stage, it will be important for the session to assess the data, listen to health experts, and act accordingly.

This guide offers phase-by-phase recommendations and questions to consider, recognizing that this is not an instance for "one plan fits all". The membership and attendance of our presbytery's congregations vary as do the size of their sessions, deacons, Bible study, mission activities, etc. The same is true for the size of facilities and their capacity to provide space and adequate ventilation for appropriate social distancing at each phase. In all cases, those who are 60 and above and those with underlying health concerns that are considered more vulnerable must be taken under

consideration. And while children and youth are at lower risk (not risk free), there is an ongoing risk of them carrying the virus back home and sharing it with other family members. There is also the developmental consideration that some ages/individuals lack the ability to understand the need for social distancing and are unable to maintain it.

In addition to our desire to protect the vulnerable and love our neighbors, there are practical reasons for reopening only when it is safe to do so. First, check with your insurance company as to any coverage restrictions or additional guidelines. It is possible your insurance company will impose requirements in order to continue coverage of the premises, liability coverage and workers' compensation coverage. Check specifically whether the congregation and session are individually covered by your policies, if one of your members or building users contracts COVID-19.

Second, by reopening, it could be argued that the congregation has accepted responsibility for ensuring the safety of the facility and compliance with public health guidelines. By law, you will owe a duty of care to people you invite to your church building or church functions and to your employees. The session will need to consider carefully the potential liability associated with reopening and should consult an attorney licensed in Wisconsin. Especially for congregations that have not incorporated under state law, ask the attorney to advise about the personal liability of members.

It is recommended that you document in writing the safety protocols that you will follow and make them known to your congregation, employees, and building users.

PHASE ONE

For all recommendations under Phase One, gatherings of fewer than 10 are permissible provided face masks are worn and social distancing of at least 6 feet is maintained. High risk individuals should continue to shelter in place. Of course, if individuals are feeling sick, they should stay home.

What we recommend:

- Continue online worship, meetings, studies and fellowship.
- Consider allowances for using the building:
    - Recording services in the sanctuary.
    - Baptisms with immediate family only. A parent should hold the child and administer the water during baptism.
    - Weddings and funerals with immediate family only.
    - Office and other administrative functions limited to as necessary while maintaining home offices.
    - Users/renters/mission activities in accordance with gathering limits and protocols.
- A plan for thorough cleaning between uses and sanitizing of high use areas. [CDC - Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility.](#)

Questions to consider:

- Will additional signage be needed throughout the church explaining changes?
- What will you do if your pastor or other employees are in the high-risk category? What can you expect from employees by state law, and what rights or limits exist on your ability to

take action against employees who are unwilling or unable to work under the conditions you set?
- Is this a session decision or a congregation decision? How will the session encourage the membership to follow the safety protocols that are adopted and, if necessary, to enforce them?
- How will you show care and justice for the individuals asked to provide cleaning and sanitizing?
- What action will you take if users/renters are not equipped or are not willing to follow your safety protocols?

PHASE TWO

For all recommendations under Phase Two, gatherings of fewer than 50 are permissible provided face masks are worn and social distancing of at least 6 feet is maintained. High risk individuals should continue to shelter in place. Of course, if individuals are feeling sick, they should stay home.

What we recommend:

- Worship in the building may resume (see above).
- Continue to offer communion online (or defer), preferably through a medium such as zoom or face time, to allow for participants to be at table "together."
  Rationale: The act of communion requires a level of proximity and touch that continues to be unsafe under Phase Two. Consider that in order to partake of communion, masks must be shifted – touching a face mask contaminates it. Any item (bread/cup/plate/etc.) used to prepare and serve communion requires at least two people touching it (usually more). Alternatives to the ways we traditionally practice Communion may be available, but may also raise both practical and theological issues, which each session will need to weigh as they consider this matter.
- No singing or use of wind instruments. (WCC-Church Music in the Time of Covid-19)
  Rationale: Public Health Officials recommend no singing in public or use of wind instruments until we have a vaccine. The aerosols produced in singing stay in the air for hours, move with air currents, and remain infectious for hours. Cloth masks are not effective in protecting against the fine kind of aerosol produced by singing - either in or out.
- Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace and collecting the offering as well as for providing access to bulletins (projecting the liturgy is ideal though not always possible).
- Consider removing Bibles, hymnals, friendship pads, and other items from the pews/chairs.
- Consider the air flow in your building and leave doors and windows open (as able) to provide maximal air flow.
- Discourage gathering/remaining after the service for fellowship.
- Infants/Children/Youth should remain in worship with parents/guardians.
- Baptisms may be provided using the same guidelines as Phase One.
- Weddings and funerals permitted within the guidelines for Phase Two gatherings.
- Office and other administrative functions may return provided safety measures are addressed.
- Use of building to users/renters/mission activities/Bible studies/meetings in accordance with gathering limits and protocols.
- A more thorough plan for providing for cleaning between uses and sanitizing of high use areas. CDC - Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility.

Rationale: The more people accessing the building and coming into contact with items increases, the greater the necessity to maintain cleaning procedures and ensure sanitizing high use spaces and multi-use items.

Questions to consider under Phase Two:

- If you decide to return to in-person worship, how will you continue to provide worship to those who either choose, or are encouraged due to risk, to remain at home?
- Consider doing a mental walkthrough of every space in the church, from the front doors, to the bathroom, to the sanctuary and classrooms, and to the kitchen. Think through what is touched and how long people will spend in that area. How will you provide for adequate social distancing in your spaces (e.g., in the sanctuary, one family per pew, pews roped off/separated?) What areas are better to close off?
- What will you do if more than fifty people show up for worship?   For those with larger memberships, how will you provide in-person worship that meets your membership? What considerations need to be given for the staff and volunteer work needed to provide and maintain this?
- How will you handle a situation in which a person wishes to use the building or attend worship, but is not equipped or willing to comply with the safety protocols?
- What role (if any) will greeters/ushers play? What guidance will they need to fulfill their role?
- For Communion, while tongs, rubber gloves, plastic cups, and individually sealed wafers may be available, do they really convey the feeling that this is "the feast of our Lord"? Similarly, if individuals are to bring their own elements, what message is then conveyed to visitors or those who did not bring their own- the table becomes a place where some can participate and others not which contradicts the message of "all are welcome".
- In determining which activities to resume, how will the wearing of face masks and social distancing impact the experience? (Picture your session/Bible study group/other gathering, all wearing masks and spaced appropriately- what is their ability to hear and engage one another? What special set-up and other precautions are needed before and after and who will see to them?)
- What additional guidelines or protocols do you need to develop for those accessing your building (ie: additional signage)? How will you manage the flow of traffic in and out of your building to provide for social distancing?
- What steps are necessary to provide safe conditions for any employees/volunteers? Will there be access to gloves/masks/hand sanitizer/regular cleaning?
- What percentage of your congregation/usual volunteers/staff are in the at-risk category? What might you need to rethink/plan differently in light of this?
- What is your communication plan and response plan if one of your members/staff/renters contracts COVID-19? How will you keep track of attendees to every function, so that contact tracing can be done in the event of a member's infection?

PHASE THREE

For all recommendations under Phase Three, face masks are strongly encouraged, and while social distancing is not necessary, it is encouraged to limit crowding. High risk individuals should continue to shelter in place.

What we recommend:

- Worship and gatherings of all sizes may resume but consider offering multiple worship services which would allow parishioners to spread out, as well as continuing virtual services to meet the needs of all parishioners. Consider online options as well for Bible studies, meetings, etc.
- Watch for public health recommendations before resuming Communion and singing/wind instruments.
- Continue to use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources.
- Fellowship gatherings, including potlucks, are still discouraged.
- We recommend against offering Vacation Bible School in person, though regular Sunday School, Confirmation, and other classes may resume.
- Office functions could resume as normal, with attention to cleaning.
- Consider the air flow in your building and leave doors and windows open (as able) to provide maximal air flow.

Questions to consider under Phase Three:

- What steps are necessary to provide safe conditions for any employees/volunteers? Will there be access to gloves/masks/hand sanitizer/regular cleaning?
- What percentage of your congregation/usual volunteers/staff are in the at-risk category? What might you need to rethink/plan differently in light of this?
- What is your communication plan and response plan if one of your members/staff/renters contracts COVID-19?
- What additional steps should you take to provide for optimal safety and health of all participants as in person engagement increases and people's caution decreases? This should include adjusted Phase Three cleaning procedures in line with occupancy and use of objects (ie: children's toys, youth areas, etc.) Also consider limiting crowding near entryways and exits.

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"The ongoing threat of the Covid-19 global pandemic will require that we return to church in a way that is measured and mindful of the needs of the most vulnerable among us. While some may begin to attend public worship in person, we know that some will need to continue to worship at home for some time. We give thanks, then, for the promise of our faith—that the Lord God will bless and keep us, the risen Christ is with us, and the Holy Spirit connects us with believers near and far. We take comfort and inspiration from the example of the earliest believers, who "spent much time together in the temple" and "broke bread at home … with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). As we anxiously track the news in these times—with numbers of new cases, numbers of persons who have died, and numbers of those who are recovering—we remember the good news of the gospel: "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47)."

(Returning to Public Worship- Theological and Practical Considerations, PC(USA))

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Wisconsin Badger Bounce Back Plan - https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02653a.pdf

Wisconsin Council of Churches - Returning to Church -
https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/

PCUSA: Returning to Public Worship - Theological and Practical Considerations
https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/covid-19/returning_to_public_worship_may_2020.pdf

Phase One	For all recommendations under Phase One, gatherings of fewer than 10 are permissible provided face masks are worn and social distancing of at least 6 feet is maintained. High risk individuals should continue to shelter in place. Of course, if individuals are feeling sick, they should stay home. For every plan below include a plan for cleaning as well as pre-planning the space needs.
Plans for Worship	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Office and Administrative work	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Meetings	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Accessing the Building and Keeping Track of Users	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

Phase Two	For all recommendations under Phase Two, gatherings of fewer than 50 are permissible provided face masks are worn and social distancing of at least 6 feet is maintained. High risk individuals should continue to shelter in place. Of course, if individuals are feeling sick, they should stay home. For every plan below include a plan for cleaning as well as pre-planning the space needs and what might need to be removed.
Plans for Worship	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Office and Administrative work	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Meetings	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Accessing the Building, Managing Attendance and Flow of Traffic for Contract Tracing	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Discipleship Formation	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

Phase Three	For all recommendations under Phase Three, face masks are strongly encouraged, and while social distancing is not necessary, it is encouraged to limit crowding. High risk individuals should continue to shelter in place. For every plan below include a plan for cleaning as well as pre-planning the space needs.
Plans for Worship	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Office and Administrative work	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Meetings	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Plans for Managing the Flow of Traffic and Attendance for Contract Tracing	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
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