

THE PRESBYTERY OF NEW HARMONY

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Reopening Guidelines for In-person Worship and Activities

New Harmony Presbytery
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A TIME FOR CAUTIOUS REFLECTION

The Guiding Council reaffirms once again that it is the Session that determines when and how a congregation reopens to in-person, inside worship and activities. **However, the Guiding Council continues to advise and encourage that this not yet happen.** We have just pasted the surge in cases and deaths for this area, but with the reopening of many businesses, there is a concern on the part of medical and health experts that cases and deaths could easily rise. Additionally, we are aware that many of our members are in vulnerable categories. **Thus, the Guiding Council encourages that each Session take this time to develop a strategic plan for your congregation and context for the time it does reopen to in-person, inside worship and activities.**

In preparation for making those decisions, the Guiding Council offers the following Guidelines to assist and support Sessions in preparation. Remember, it is the Session who decides and it is the Session that takes full responsibility for all decisions and the results of those decisions. **Again, the Guiding Council urges Sessions not to rush reopening in-person worship or activities!**

Prior to any reopening/returning to any in-person worship or activities, the Session shall be in consultation directly with and receive counsel directly from the congregation's insurance company as a first step of preparation!

These congregations wished they hadn't opened up so soon:

[These congregational leaders would like a do-over, but now want others to learn from their tragic COVID19 experience.](#)

[Georgia congregation closes two weeks after reopening it when several families come down with Coronavirus.](#)

[CDC Sends Alarms about Arkansas Church Reopening.](#)

SETTING PRIORITIES

As the Session makes these prayerful considerations and decisions and as it reflects upon the guidelines herein, it is good to consider the following questions from the Rev. Cindy Kohlmann, Co-Moderator of the 223rd General Assembly:

The mission of the Presbytery of New Harmony is to strengthen, nurture, and sustain its congregations and ministers, and to participate in the wider mission of the church through its higher governing bodies.

Do we want to use the resources of time, talent, and treasure available to us to figure out protocols and practicalities for opening buildings in a way that might help people stay safe but will not be guaranteed...

Or...

Do we want to use the resources of time, taken, and treasure available to us to be the body of Christ dispersed and deployed until it is safe for all people to return to our buildings without restrictions?

Which is more faithful...at this time and for our congregations?

ANOTHER WAY TO BEGIN THE SESSION DISCUSSION

If we gather for in-person worship and activities....

What would be the best case scenario or results?

What would be the worst case?

It would be well for the Session to read:

[Don't Let the Coronavirus Divide Your Leadership our Congregation](#)

[RPCUSA - Returning to Public Worship: Theological and Practical Considerations](#)

We encourage you to reset your individual and congregational expectations (see [Returning to Church: Resetting our Expectations](#)) as attendance may likely not be the same as before. Likewise, worship may likely not be as it was before. As we take prudent measures to demonstrate love for one another during these times and abide in that love, how is God inviting us to be the church now and anew?

THINGS TO CONSIDER

For the foreseeable future, please follow [Center for Disease Control Guidelines for Faith Organizations](#), [COVID-19 Exit Strategy](#), [South Carolina's Department of Health and Environmental Control \(DHEC\)](#) and other scientific advice, we advise, as of May 27, 2020:

- No in-person worship or activities until the above organizations indicate it is safe for your size worshipping community. Continue virtual worship, bible study, Session and Committee meetings, and activities, remembering that NHP is offering [COVID-19 Partnership Grants for Technology](#)

*Bulletins, agendas, and other materials should be made available by email, on the congregation's website and/or Facebook page, etc.

- Celebrate Communion "virtually". ([PCUSA Constitutional Approval for Virtual Communion](#) and [Online Communion Ought to be Celebrated, Not Shunned says Diane Butler Bass](#))
- Continue arrangements for offerings to be mailed, dropped off, or made electronically.
- Approach local mission using safety protocols and addresses essential needs, remembering that NHP is offering COVID-19 Partnership Grants for Local Mission.
- Minimize the use of staff, with as little crossover and contact as possible, to perform necessary operations.
- Before any in-person worship or activities, every congregation shall consult its insurance carrier for its counsel.

[Center for Disease Control Guidelines for Faith Organizations](#)

PREPARING TO RETURN

Before any relaunch and/or return carefully discern when and how potential changes towards a “new normal” in church life shall take place:

- Consult with church insurance provider and incorporate any specific requirements.
- Continue “virtual” worship presence, in order to include as many as possible, in particular, vulnerable populations.
- Continue or even initiate new Bible Studies and small group gatherings that meet online.
- Expand and/or continue to limit office functions, using safety protocols, including everyone wearing masks and practicing regular cleaning and sanitizing. ([Insurance Board on Reopening the Church Office](#))
- Establish, communicate and evaluate cleaning and sanitation requirements, including rest rooms, kitchen, office equipment, etc. ([CDC Guidance for a Plan for Cleaning and Disinfecting](#) and [CDC Guidelines on Cleaning and Disinfecting](#))
- Make decisions regarding reopening and returning as a Session and determine how satisfactory decisions will be made, for example, will a decision by simple majority, super majority, or unanimous decision be required.
- Communicate Session decisions that include requirements for how and when worship will take place through multiple platforms (such as congregational letter, newsletter, social media post, phone calls).
 - *communicate any requirements regarding mask-wearing, personal contact, entrances and exits in worship space, changes in worship, childcare information.
 - *communicate to the congregation that they are responsible for their own decisions to Participate in any and all in-person worship activities.
 - *Advise vulnerable populations to fully participate in congregational life only through virtual means until there is a vaccine! ([From CDC Extra Precautions for People at Higher Risk](#)). Offer accommodations and assistance to make this more possible and accessible. Have a plan and script for ushers and greeters when a person of high risk arrives for worship, the intent of which, would graciously discourage them from attending in-person (perhaps have extra masks available or a computer set up in a separate room for them to view worship.
 - *Establish protocols for mask-wearing, distancing, cleaning and sanitation, etc. ([Mayo Clinic on the Science and Wisdom of Wearing Masks](#), [World Health Organization on Wearing Mask](#), [CDC Guidance for a Plan for Cleaning and Disinfecting](#), and [CDC Guidance on Cleaning and Disinfecting](#))
 - *Develop consistent verbiage (in digital bulletins, on website, social media, signage in building regarding temperature checks, mask-wearing, cleaning and sanitation, social distancing, etc.
- Determine what to do and how to communicate if/when a worshipper or staff member contracts the virus after being on-site.
- Determine what the limits and parameters are for life events including weddings and funerals. (See Weddings and Funerals toward the end of Worship Guidelines)
- Consider when and how to open building/facility to regular users (outside groups, renters, etc.) that are able to observe participation limits and distancing protocols and that you are able to maintain cleaning and sanitizing requirements, as well as considerations for heat/air (recycled air).

Here’s one congregation’s principles and plans: [St Luke’s Guiding Principles](#) [YouTube Produced by Congregation Explaining the Preopen Procedures](#)

PREPARING FOR WORSHIP

- Make a plan for arrival and departure. One way into and out of the sanctuary or building.
- Mark off the “traffic flow” and seats spaced six feet apart.
- What about other spaces, including restrooms, access to the church office, etc?
- Consider encouraging members to utilize the restroom at home, prior to coming to church as the restroom is a small enclosed space that provides lots of surface to clean and disinfect.
- Have a plan for cleaning and disinfecting all spaces used. ([CDC Guidance for a Plan for Cleaning and Disinfecting](#), and [CDC Guidance on Cleaning and Disinfecting](#))
- Prepare the HVAC system and facility for not having air conditioning running. (Possibly run the AC all night, in advance of worship, and turn the system completely off in time for the air circulation to cease prior to any gatherings. ([How COVID-19 Droplets Suspend and Travel in the Air](#))

ACTUAL WORSHIP

- No paper bulletins (or you can print and distribute onto the pews several days prior to worship) Consider emailing bulletins in order to be printed out and brought or downloaded onto phones or tablets; liturgist can announce elements; utilize Call and Response; utilize screens, social media, even flip charts.
- No circulating air either by an HVAC or ceiling fans. Open outside windows if possible, or better still conduct worship outdoors. ([How COVID-19 Droplets Suspend and Travel in the Air](#))
- Remove hymnals, friendship pads, all other information/handouts from the pews **unless** the sanctuary can be closed for 72 hours.
- No congregational singing or choir. A soloist, a family/household ensemble or several appropriately distant from one another can provide music. It’s recommended that Plexiglas be used in front of singers or the singers not directly face the congregation. Ask the congregation to hum along while wearing masks; maybe those who never sing during hymns would be willing to hum!

([National Association of Singing Teachers of Singing talking with Experts on Infection Disease](#))
([Churches could be the Deadliest Places in the COVID-19 Pandemic](#))
- The Pastor should wear a mask or preach behind Plexiglas.
- Everyone wears masks and practices appropriate physical distance. ([Mayo Clinic on the Science and Wisdom of Wearing Masks](#) and [World Health Organization on Wearing Masks](#))

Childcare: Children remain with their families. Childcare and nursery should be suspended for the foreseeable future.

Baptisms: Family will hold baby or child and place water on the baptized one’s head. Pastoral leader will lead liturgy, observing appropriate physical distancing.

Communion: We advise continuing to celebrate communion at home/virtually. (PCUSA Constitutional Approval for Virtual Communion and Online Communion Ought to be Celebrated, Not Shunned says Diane Butler Bass)

During an in-person worship service, congregants should bring their own elements.

Weddings and Funerals: We advise small gatherings of immediate family with appropriate use of masks and appropriate physical distancing being followed. Remember, these too can be done virtually

and allows for many more to “attend.” ([PCUSA Resources for Online Service of Witness to the Resurrection](#) and [National Funeral Directors Association COVID-19 Guidelines](#))

FOR OTHER CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Mission: Explore opportunities for financial and prayerful support. Look for ways to respond to immediate community needs. Continue to practice vigilant safety and hygiene protocols, including masks, gloves, distancing, and sanitation with any and all activities. Phase in participation to in-person gatherings starting with smaller numbers and increasing as the local protocols allow and recommend. Remember that NHP is offering COVID-19 Partnership Grants for Local Mission ([NHP's COVID-19 Webpage](#))

[PCUSA Keeping Congregations Vibrant During a COVID-19](#)

Fellowship/Activities: Construct opportunities for gathering and continuing to gather virtually. While continuing to practice vigilant safety and hygiene protocols, including masks, gloves, distancing, and sanitation with any and all activities, phase in in-person gatherings of small group gatherings beginning with 10 or fewer.

Meetings: (Session, Committees, etc.) Continue to meet virtually, which will continue to allow more people to participate. While continuing to practice vigilant safety and hygiene protocols, including masks, gloves, distancing, and sanitation with any and all activities, phase in in-person gatherings of small group gatherings beginning with 10 or fewer. ([PCUSA Constitutional Opinion of Virtual Session Meetings and Decisions](#))

Church Office: [Insurance Board on Reopening the Church Office](#)

Annual or Special Events: Postpone or delay. Consider holding a virtual event now.

What CAN our Congregations DO?

- Worship and Fellowship: zoom, freeconferencecall.com, Facebook [Messenger Rooms is Now Available](#), home worship with resources provided, drive-in/drive-up worship, parking lot services, in the future, small groups can more easily gather for worship outside (which will reduce the necessity for wide-ranging sanitation and cleaning requirements to be met.)
- Sing: [The Mennonites Show Ways to Sing!](#)
- Pray: establish an email prayer “chain”. Share prayer requests via newsletters, etc.
- Connect: Deacons and Elders can make and maintain contact with members and friends of the congregation through calls, notes, email.
- Give: [The Presbyterian Foundation](#) will assist your congregation in establishing online giving. Publicize giving options and opportunities.
- Grow: update signage, website, voicemail information with worship times and platform.
- Serve: contact local agencies about immediate needs and explore how to respond.

You are not alone! God is in our midst!

Reach out to NHP Staff, COM liaison, your colleagues and neighbors.

Ask for help, advice, ideas.

**NHP and its staff is available to assist and support the Session
in this unprecedented time of faith-filled leadership.**

REMEMBER

Church is not cancelled.

Worship isn't cancelled.

Faith, hope, and love are not cancelled.

Generosity and stewardship are not cancelled.

Loving our neighbors is not cancelled.

Church is not cancelled!

Virtual worship, Bible study and fellowship activities are not unreal.

They are real! They are not in-person, but they are very real!

**And people's lives are being changed
by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit!**