

Pressing On

Illinois Great Rivers Conference Guidance on Congregational Safety

As we continue to minister with and serve our communities during the COVID-19 global pandemic, we are seeing our churches transform and adapt in amazing ways. When faced with the specter of this disease, the United Methodists of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference have innovated and adjusted their ministries to continue to proclaim in word and action the good news of Christ's love and the healing power of God's grace. We have appreciated the deep care many of our church leaders have shown to God's larger community as they have attempted to faithfully and creatively apply our Christian principles in innovating new ways of ministry while keeping people safe. This document is intended to provide assistance and guidance to church leaders as they consider their ministries. Our goal, in all things, is to fulfill our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world as we do all in our power to ensure that our communities and congregations are healthy and well.

Pressing On

In Philippians 3:12-16, the Apostle Paul encourages us to "press on" in our discipleship. He reminds us that even we have not yet reached it, we can "press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of god in Christ Jesus." As we are entering a new phase of the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic, we also want to encourage you to press on with your ministries, to press on with your commitment to public safety, and to press on with your witness to God's love through tangible actions that display care for others in your communities and congregations.

We know that this pandemic is not yet over. Over the past few months, we have seen surging cases throughout our region, increasing hospitalizations, and a continuing number of deaths. We have seen clergy and lay leaders in our Conference grow ill, be hospitalized, and need to remain quarantined. Sadly, we continue to see church participants, friends, community members, and extended family die from COVID-19. It is easy to grow overwhelmed and consider giving up on community safety practices or on ministry activities or on both. But God has promised us strength to press on, strength in claiming Christ's power for ourselves and our witness, and strength through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Be encouraged, for we do not run this race alone! God will guide our feet, and we will not run this race in vain!

Process for Using this Guidance:

Build a Health & Safety Team. Given the significant changes needed to gather safely, churches will want to have a team of people learning, discerning, and leading together. This team should be led by the pastor and might include worship leaders, building staff, trustees, pastor-parish relations committee members, the lay leader, children's ministry leaders, and a couple of innovative thinkers who can help with strategy. The goal of the team is to create a covenant of

common safety understandings that the congregation will practice in order to keep themselves, their families, their neighbors, their community, and their region as safe as possible.

Your leadership team should continue to have conversations that focus on these key questions:

- Why do we gather for worship, discipleship-formation, or fellowship?
- How can we make gatherings in our buildings as safe as possible?
- How will we inform, educate, and encourage safe participation from our congregation?
- How will we respond to people who do not understand or refuse to practice our group safety practices?

This document provides many guidelines and recommendations, but local church leaders should not consider this an exhaustive listing of all cautions. In addition to this guidance, local church leaders should pay close attention and comply with federal, state, and local public health officials. **This guidance will change and be updated periodically as new information or public health guidelines become available, which will require updating local church safety plans as well.** Finally, local church leaders should be in contact with and follow any additional guidance provided by your local church insurance provider, especially when it comes to limiting any potential liabilities.

Restore Illinois Plan Phase 4

Our state Illinois Department of Public Health has provided a template for community precautions through their Restore Illinois plan. The full plan is available from [the state coronavirus site](#). It has five phases:

- 1) **Phase 1 – Rapid Spread**
- 2) **Phase 2 – Flattening**
- 3) **Phase 3 – Recovery**
- 4) **Phase 4 – Revitalization**
- 5) **Phase 5 – Illinois Restored**

As of this update the entire state of Illinois is in Phase 4, but several Public Health Regions have added additional mitigation efforts. These are mitigations are targeted and applied to reduce community spread. The IGRC will seek to provide updated information about any additional mitigations for your area, and you can review the most update information from the IDPH here: <https://coronavirus.illinois.gov/s/restore-illinois-mitigation-plan>.

Be aware that these mitigation levels will likely change multiple times until there is an effective and available vaccine or treatment. These will be implemented according to local conditions within eleven regions based on the State of Illinois Emergency Medical Services regions. Our Illinois Great Rivers Conference has members and churches in several of these regions, and we are expecting that we will have different churches utilizing different safety practices based on the public health guidance for their region. Regions are primarily determined by counties, and you can find your region on the map provided by the Restore Illinois plan:

1. **NORTH:** Boone, Carroll, DeKalb, Jo Daviess, Lee, Ogle, Stephenson, Whiteside, Winnebago
2. **NORTH-CENTRAL:** Bureau, Fulton, Grundy, Henderson, Henry, Kendall, Knox, La Salle, Livingston, Marshall, McDonough, McLean, Mercer, Peoria, Putnam, Rock Island, Stark, Tazewell, Warren, Woodford
3. **WEST-CENTRAL:** Adams, Brown, Calhoun, Cass, Christian, Greene, Hancock, Jersey, Logan, Macoupin, Mason, Mason, Menard, Montgomery, Morgan, Pike, Sangamon, Schuyler, Scott
4. **METRO EAST:** Bond, Clinton, Madison, Monroe, Randolph, St. Clair, Washington
5. **SOUTHERN:** Alexander, Edwards, Franklin, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Marion, Massac, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Saline, Union, Wabash, Wayne, White, Williamson
6. **EAST-CENTRAL:** Champaign, Clark, Clay, Coles, Crawford, Cumberland, De Witt, Douglas, Edgar, Effingham, Fayette, Ford, Iroquois, Jasper, Lawrence, Macon, Moultrie, Piatt, Richland, Shelby, Vermillion
7. **SOUTH SUBURBAN:** Kankakee, Will
8. **WEST SUBURBAN:** DuPage, Kane
9. **NORTH SUBURBAN:** Lake, McHenry
10. **SUBURBAN COOK:** Suburban Cook
11. **CHICAGO:** City of Chicago



Information about the conditions, criteria, and status of each region can be found at the Illinois Department of Public Health page: <http://www.dph.illinois.gov/regionmetrics>.

Summary Chart of Church Guidance for Phase 4 and Phase 5:

This chart presents a general overview of the major safety guidance for our churches during Phase 4 and its three mitigation tiers. This overview chart is to help orient church leaders to the detailed guidance offered in the rest of this document.

Phase 4: REVITALIZATION

- Churches may gather indoors for any purpose in groups of 50 and less
- Churches with larger rooms may gather indoor groups of up to 25% of the room capacity, but may not exceed 100 people in total
- Churches may gather out-of-doors in groups of any size with proper distancing and masks
- Children and youth ministry programs may occur
- Social distancing, face masks, and other precautions should be taken for all activities
- Churches should not practice group singing
- Church buildings may be open all kinds of groups and meetings of appropriate size, and all church staff and volunteers can regularly use the building

Phase 4 with Tier 1 Mitigations

- For regular worship gatherings, churches are recommended but not required to limit their gatherings to 25 people or 25% of the room capacity, whichever is smaller
- For all other gatherings, including funerals and weddings, gatherings should be limited to 25 people or 25% of the room capacity, whichever is smaller

Phase 4 with Tier 2 Mitigations

- For regular worship gatherings, churches are strongly recommended but not required to limit their gatherings to 25 people or 25% of the room capacity, whichever is smaller
- For all other gatherings, including funerals and weddings, gatherings should be limited to 10 people or less

Phase 4 with Tier 3 Mitigations

- For the good of the congregation and community, churches are very strongly recommended not to hold in-person worship gatherings indoors or outdoors
- Churches may gather for Drive In worship services in groups of any size with proper distancing (See guidelines in this document for details)
- Church buildings should close, and staff should work from home, except for essential and minimum basic operations that need to be conducted in the building

Phase 5: ILLINOIS RESTORED

- Churches may gather in unlimited size groups for any purpose
- It is now safer for people of higher risk of dying from COVID-19 to gather

SAFETY IN WORSHIP

- 1) **Indoor Gathering Size** – Churches can meet indoors in groups of 50 people or fewer for worship, leadership meetings, discipleship formation, and missional service. Some churches may determine that they will continue to meet for public worship exclusively online in order to avoid excluding congregants who may not yet feel safe attending in person gatherings. Most churches will want to continue to offer their online or broadcast worship experience in addition to any small group in person gatherings.
- 2) **Indoor Worship Services** – Churches can meet for worship indoors in a place that allows for extensive social distancing. Attendance should be limited to 25% of the room capacity or 100 attendees, whichever is lower.
- 3) **Larger Facilities** – Some churches with larger facilities may exceed the 100 attendees limit but not exceed 25% of room capacity if they have a local-church approved comprehensive safety plan that outlines their procedures for appropriate social distancing, cleaning, contact logging, and education of their congregation. This plan should be sent to their District Superintendent who will keep it on record. Insurance coverage adequate to the comprehensive safety plan is expected.
- 4) **Outdoor Gatherings and Worship** – Churches can meet outdoors. Where weather and facilities permit, it is much safer for worship and other activities to occur outdoors rather than indoors. At an outdoor gathering, people should sit with those from their household and maintain at least six feet apart from other people and household groups. Even when meeting outdoors, the church will need to follow appropriate social distancing, mask wearing, logging of participants, and other safety precautions. If continuing with singing and group recitation outdoors, increase social distance to at least 10 feet between groups and ensure face coverings are worn.
- 5) **Weddings and Funerals** – Weddings and funerals may be held in the church building of no more than 50 people in any size room or 25% of the room capacity in larger rooms but must not exceed 100 people in those larger rooms unless the church has an approved safety plan as described above, in which case they may meet up to 25% of the room capacity without the 100 person limit.
- 6) **Reservations System** – Churches will need to build a system to ensure that indoor groups will be 50 people or fewer. This can be done through a system of pre-registration (online or via phone reservation), tickets, or preparations to limit the number of people who can enter the building.
- 7) **Contact Log** – Churches should keep a log of participants to any size gathering or who enter the church building. This can be used to notify participants should someone also present at that gather later test positive for COVID-19. The log should include Name, Address, Phone, and Other Contact information.
- 8) **Multiple Gatherings** – Gatherings are any distinct group of people who do not interact with anyone else. Multiple gatherings can occur simultaneously in the same facility if they had staggered start times so people weren't in the parking lot at the same time, had separate bathroom facilities, had separate entrances, had doors closed between the two groups, had separate HVAC air handling equipment that didn't circulate between the two areas, and had no people (including clergy) moving between the groups. If a

person who was at any gathering tested positive for COVID-19, everyone in the facility would need to be notified and recommended that they be tested and self-quarantine for the recommended amount of time.

- 9) **Masks and Face Coverings** – All people, including worship leaders, musicians, pastors, and congregants should wear a face covering. Children under the age of 2 years and others specifically exempted by public health guidelines (which frequently require a specific directive from a medical care provider and not just a self-diagnosis) may be present without masks. Masks are only effective if they are used correctly and used by everyone present. As an acceptable alternative to a face shield for the pastor and other presenters, churches may consider installing a plexiglass divider to provide a physical barrier between the speaker and the congregation.
- 10) **Distancing** – All people, including worship leaders, musicians, pastors, and congregants should remain at least 6 feet from other people. People who live within the same household may be within 6 feet of each other.
- 11) **Ventilation** – Fresh air should be frequently circulated into any room where people are gathered. Open windows, doors, and fresh air intakes on HVAC systems can make this easier, but you may have to relocate gatherings out of closed-off rooms and into spaces with greater access to fresh air.
- 12) **Cleaning** – Have a plan in place to provide adequate time and supplies for assigned people to clean and sanitized exposed surfaces (including pew backs, door handles, bathrooms, and other high traffic areas between services).
- 13) **Holy Communion** – Holy Communion can be safely conducted. However, Holy Communion presents a unique safety challenge, as it typically involves close physical contact, eating, and drinking. Touching a face mask to remove or shift it to take the elements will contaminate the mask and increases the risk of viral exposure. Those serving communion share the same risk as those receiving, so any communion practice must be strictly non-contact. Some churches may prefer to continue providing communion through online broadcasts, but if a congregation chooses to offer in person communion, they should find ways to invite congregants to bring their own elements or to pre-distribute sanitarily prepared and packaged communion elements that can be accessed while maintaining a 6-foot social distance.
- 14) **Baptism** – Baptisms can be safely conducted. Baptisms should limit close personal contact and no skin-to-skin contact is recommended during baptisms. If necessary, it is recommended that parents hold babies and small children as the pastor performs the rite. Methods of baptism that pour water from a cup or pitcher allow for less contact during the sacrament.
- 15) **Singing** – When meeting indoors congregations and choirs should not join in singing of hymns, praise songs, or other congregational music. A small group of worship and music leaders (no more than 3 people) may provide sung music if they are located 25 feet or more from the congregation and are located behind plexiglass or some other shield. Singing has a high risk of spreading water droplets which can carry the virus a significant distance and can potentially keep the virus suspended in the air for quite a long time. A cloth mask is unlikely to be enough to protect you or your neighbor even as you practice appropriate physical distancing. Despite its dangers, some congregations will continue

to practice group singing. If this occurs, church leaders should do whatever they can to make it as safe as possible including: wearing masks, increasing distance between people as far as possible, limiting the number and duration of songs, limiting the number of singers, places songs near the end of worship, and explicitly warning high-risk people that they may have a higher risk of viral exposure during the congregation's gatherings.

- 16) **Handling Objects** – Bulletins should be handled with care so as not to transmit viruses from one person to another. Use no-touch alternatives for passing the peace, collecting offering, and liturgical resources. Consider removing pew Bibles, hymnals and friendship pads especially if you will have multiple services. Use single-use bulletins or screens as alternatives.
- 17) **Children's Sermons** – For children's time, do not have children come forward and gather together.
- 18) **Entry & Exit Congestion** – Avoid greeting lines at the beginning or ending of the gathering. Help people to leave in a staggered fashion in order to avoid groups bunching up in hallways, doorways, or parking areas.
- 19) **Food** – Do not offer fellowship meals, snacks, donuts, or coffee hour. Continue encouraging people to leave the building rather than mingling.

SAFETY IN DRIVE-IN WORSHIP

- 1) **Entry & Exit Congestion** – Utilize hospitality volunteers or signage to direct parking. Do not have people stop and converse with each other as they enter.
- 2) **Masks and Social Distancing** – Everyone, including volunteers, staff, and clergy, must follow social distancing guidelines at all times. This includes, wearing masks in public and staying six feet from other people. Pay special attention that worship leaders keep appropriate distancing. This is particularly important as the singing and speaking of the leaders can lead to viral transmission much further than six feet. Safest practice includes broadcasting the worship service via FM radio or wi-fi streaming, and extra caution must be exercised if the worship service is simply amplified to worshippers listening in their vehicles.
- 3) **Vehicle Groups** – People who live together should be the only ones who travel together, without introducing new people to the vehicle, stopping to pick up someone else, or have people from outside of their household in their vehicle.
- 4) **Drive-In Tier 1 & 2 Mitigations** – People may gather outside their vehicles in appropriate gathering sizes, but they should only sit with those from their household and maintain at least six feet apart from other people and household groups. Even when meeting outdoors, the church will need to follow appropriate social distancing, mask wearing, logging of participants, and other safety precautions. If continuing with singing and group recitation outdoors, increase social distance to at least 10 feet between groups and ensure face coverings are worn.
- 5) **Tier 3 Mitigations** – No one should leave vehicles for any reason. Do not open tailgates or sit near vehicle in folding chairs. Worshippers should stay in their vehicle. It is safest to leave windows up and closed, but this might not be possible in all situations. Please share this caution with any worshippers. The church building should remain closed. This

includes the restrooms. Please do not have worshippers in the church building for any purpose.

- 6) **Parking** – Park every other spot, keeping a car width (at least six feet) between vehicles. Discourage participants from hanging out windows or yelling between cars. Coronavirus is most commonly spread through respirated water droplets, which can travel up to six feet with regular breathing. Singing, shouting, or talking loudly can send respirated water vapor much, much further.
- 7) **Bulletins and Handouts** – Limit or avoid passing objects to one another, including passing out bulletins and hymnals or passing the offering plate. Participants should not “just drop this off” to another person while they are at worship.
- 8) **Non-contact Options** – Continue to provide a non-contact worship option for congregants who determine that it is not safe for them to participate in Drive In worship.
- 9) **Preparation** – In advance, have church leaders determine how they will respond to promote group safety if participants do not follow these guidelines.

SAFETY IN YOUTH & CHILDREN’S MINISTRIES

- 1) **Children’s Ministries** – Programming can be held in person in groups of less than 50, including children and adult leaders. All programs should follow appropriate social distancing and use face coverings as recommended by state public health officials. All programs must follow Department of Health approved guidance on adult supervision, cleaning, and group size. Some churches may determine that they cannot offer a safe and quality children’s program, and they may choose to continue their online or other programming. Children are often safest and make the congregation safest if they remain with their household groups while they are in the building.
- 2) **Youth Ministries** – Programming can be held in person in groups of less than 50, including children and adult leaders. All programs should follow appropriate social distancing and use face coverings as recommended by state public health officials.
- 3) **Scout Program** – Scouting programs should follow all the guidelines for children and youth church groups as well as any additional council or troop guidelines. Overnight camping programs are discouraged until it is safe for non-household members to be unmasked in shared vehicles and shared cabins or tents.
- 4) **Day Camps, After School Programs, and Youth Sports Programming** – Day camps, after school programs, and youth sports programming may be held. They must comply with all of the detailed and specific requirements provided by the Illinois Department of Commerce and any additional requirements of local public health officials. IDC requirements can be found at: <https://dceocovid19resources.com/restore-illinois/restore-illinois-phase-4> and <https://www.dph.illinois.gov/covid19/community-guidance/daycare-centers>.

SAFETY IN MEETINGS & GATHERINGS

- 1) **Discipleship Formation** – People may gather in groups of 50 and less, wearing masks, and practicing appropriate social distancing. Some participants will not yet feel safe or comfortable being in public, and any small group experience should provide an easy and accessible means for them to participate either online or over the telephone. This may mean that it is more comfortable and effective for many discipleship-formation groups to continue to meet primarily online or over the telephone.
- 2) **Leadership Meetings** – People may gather in groups of 50 and less, wearing masks, and practicing appropriate social distancing. Charge Conferences should seek guidance from their District Superintendent on how to legally and safely conduct their business.
- 3) **Church Meals** – Do not offer church meals at this time. Although food preparation may be safely performed by abiding to safe food-handling procedures, gathering groups of people to eat together at tables, removing masks, and sharing close space is very risky. In order to prioritize reducing risk for worship gatherings, we do not recommend adding the additional risk of hosting church meals for fellowship, fundraising, or funerals. Pick-up and drive-through meal fundraisers provide a much safer option for most communities.
- 4) **Church Staff** – Church staff, pastors, and other workers using the church facility are allowed to return to work in the church building but working conditions must follow Department of Public Health approved safety guidance depending upon risk level. Remote, at-home, and virtual office work is strongly encouraged wherever possible. Continue to attend to cleaning and sanitizing the office. Pay particular attention to high-touch surfaces and cleaning hands after dealing with the offering.

SAFETY IN MISSIONS

- 1) **Local Missions** – Church food banks, food pantries, and feeding ministries are “essential” functions, and they should continue while following all public health precautions, safe food-handling precautions, and high levels of social distancing. Volunteers who at higher-risk of dying from COVID-19 should not participate, and new volunteers might need to be recruited.
- 2) **Mission Trips**—Those planned outside of the local area may be held if travel destinations are safe and if people can travel safely together. 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.

SAFETY IN PASTORAL CARE

- 1) **Pastoral Visitation** – Strive to limit indoor pastoral care visits to less than fifteen minutes, wear a face mask, and keep appropriate distance of six feet or more. Some exceptional circumstances will require taking additional risks to provide acceptable care. The more care and caution you can take in non-emergency situations, the more likely

you can reduce your risk and be available to provide care in those exceptional circumstances.

- 2) **Ministry with the Sick** – Follow guidance of health-care facilities for ministry with the sick in these facilities. Do not conduct in-person ministries with any person with any symptoms of COVID-19, including coughing, nasal congestions, or fever.
- 3) **Ministry with those Isolated or Shut-In** – Given their increased risk, many people in care facilities or with chronic illnesses have become increasingly isolated. Take care to develop plans to reach out to those who are isolated or shut in. Churches can organize a special congregational care team that can make regular phone calls, send cards, arrange window visits, and provide equipment and coaching on connecting into church video broadcasts.
- 4) **Caring for the Pastor and Staff** – Church leaders are working incredibly hard at innovating new ways for congregations to safely fulfill their mission. Many pastors and staff have had to create new work patterns, new team structures, and new methods of communication. They have done this while experiencing frustration at their own capacity, irritation from church members who can't do everything they way they would have preferred, and their own anxiety about this pandemic. Please find ways to encourage and support your congregation's pastors and staff.

SAFETY IN OTHER MATTERS

- 1) Check with your insurance carrier to see if they have any additional guidelines for your church to follow.
- 5) Post signs throughout the building indicating symptoms and urging people to stay home and seek medical attention if they have symptoms.
- 6) Maintain a good stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
- 7) Clean the building regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces.
- 8) Local church Trustees may allow other building users or renters into the church facilities for their activities, ensure that they observe gathering limits, safety procedures including mask usage, distancing protocols, and that church personnel are able to accommodate cleaning needs. Consider church liability as you make this decision and any guidelines your insurer might recommend.

What to do if someone in your church tests positive for COVID-19:

When a person with a confirmed COVID-19 case has been in the facility for any purpose or at any gathering, regardless of community transmission rates or safety guidelines phasing, you will want to pay close attention to safety practices in order to mitigate the possibility of additional exposures. These must include:

- 1) Follow local community rules for close coordination and communication with local public health officials.

- 2) Contact and inform your District Superintendent.
- 3) Contact those who may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.
 - a) Review your contact log to determine who has been potentially exposed. This would include anyone who was in close contact (less than 6 feet distance AND/OR more than 15 minutes in contact) with the person in the 5 days prior to their positive test results. So, if the person received a positive test on Wednesday, everyone they were in close contact with from Saturday through Wednesday should consider themselves as exposed.
 - b) Please maintain the privacy of the person who has tested positive and avoid sharing their name or identifying characteristics. If they self-identify publicly, then you may share their name or identification only with those whom they have already shared it.
 - c) People who have been potentially exposed should
 - i) isolate for 14 days OR
 - ii) isolate for at least 5 days from exposure and received 2 negative tests administered at least 24 hours apart
- 4) Clean and sanitize the facility, particularly areas frequently contacted by users or areas visited by anyone with a confirmed case of COVID-19. This can be done in one of two ways:
 - a) Close your facility and follow the detailed cleaning instructions provided by the Centers for Disease Control found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/cleaning-disinfection.html>
 - b) Completely close your facility from all people (including cleaning staff) for seven days. This would give sufficient time for the virus to completely die on all contact surfaces.
- 5) Discontinue use of facility, including worship, meetings, office functions, and all group gatherings until it can be made safe for others to use.
- 6) Communicate clearly with the congregation to share with them changes to your ministry activity plans and to assure them of your safety practices.

Where to find additional resources:
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Cleaning and Disinfection for Community Facilities

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/cleaning-disinfection.html>

Public Health Guidance for Community-Related Exposure

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/public-health-recommendations.html>

Discontinuation of Isolation for Persons with COVID-19 Not in Healthcare Settings

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/disposition-in-home-patients.html>

Illinois Department of Public Health: Guidance for Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services:

<http://www.dph.illinois.gov/covid19/community-guidance/places-worship-guidance>

Centers for Disease Control: Interim Guidance for Administrators and Leaders of Community and Faith-Based Organizations to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/guidance-community-faith-organizations.html>